

A LOST IDEAL

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BY

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CHAPTER I

“When hope is without measure
And life a thrill of pleasure.”



TOWARDS sundown on a fine September evening, a horseman rode leisurely up the beautiful road which follows the windings of the Teviot from Hallkirk to Broadrule. He might have been taken for a gentleman-farmer or a country squire, his brown felt hat, tweed coat, and mud-bespattered gaiters having nothing professional about them. Nevertheless, Brian Laidlaw was a graduate of two universities, and at eight-and-twenty was proud to write M.D. Edin. after his name.

His appearance may best be described in the homely but expressive phrase of his native dale as *buirldly*. He was well built, tall, and manly ; his well-featured, honest face was tanned by exposure to all weathers, and his fine blue eyes, though keen and piercing, had withal a kindly gleam which did not belie the tender side of the man's nature. The six-o'clock bells, signal for the cessation of labour at the factories in Hallkirk, came pealing, not unmusically, up the valley, and the young doctor rather absently took out his watch. He had been out of his bed since four o'clock that morning, called to attend a shepherd's wife among the hills up Rule Water, and after

going his long round had paid her a second visit, and was now going home, for the first time. Yet he did not appear to be in any hurry ; he rode leisurely, and the reins hung loosely on his horse's neck—a beautiful animal, strong and fleet, with just sufficient breeding to give the high-bred touch the young doctor loved. Between the two there was a perfect understanding ; by the animals as well as human beings with whom he came in contact, Brian Laidlaw was deservedly beloved. Finding his master in a thoughtful mood, Bob gradually relaxed his pace, and proceeded in a very leisurely manner up the somewhat hilly road. To one not pressed for time there was certainly much to admire in that pleasant scene, and the hour, just after sundown, was still and lovely enough to lay a hush upon the spirit. The road followed the course of the river, as limpid and pellucid here as if factories and their necessary abominations had no existence ; in the little pools the trout leaped merrily, the music of the ripples sweetly breaking the extreme stillness of the air. The high but gradually sloping river banks were richly clothed with alder, birch, and willow, relieved at intervals by the beautiful rowan-tree, on which the clusters hung rich and red.

Autumn had laid her mellowing finger on the land. Many fields on the low ground were already reaped ; those on the higher slopes ripe for the sickle. The abundant woods were many-hued, and where the sunset glow fell athwart the hills showed the purple glory of the heather still undimmed. Although Brian Laidlaw was by no means unappreciative of the beauty thus lavishly spread before him, his mind was just then occupied with other thoughts. Presently horse and rider emerged from the shadow of a little belt of wood skirting the road on either side, and then a smile, slight but very tender, took away the graver lines from his mouth. Before him, cresting the sloping bank of the river, a grey spire, not ungraceful, rose up from the trees, standing out sharp and well-defined against the amber clearness of the sky.

Quite close to it, only separated from the churchyard by a low mossy wall and a row of sombre yews, stood an old-fashioned,

rambling country house, the parish manse of Broadrule. Brian had a sprig of white heather in his buttonhole which he had found that afternoon on the face of Ruberslaw, behind the shepherd's hut. He was not much given to romancing or sentimentalising, this stalwart, clear-headed country doctor; nevertheless the finding of the white heather, emblem of his country's luck, had conveyed to him a message, the blossoming of the loveliest hope of his life. It had told him that day that the time had now come, and that he might now ask, in what words seemed most fitting to him, for the woman he wished to make his wife, the woman he had loved all his life since the days when they had played together boy and girl on the smooth lawns of the manse garden. The vague longings of his soul took definite shape as he came within sight of the old white house, and, forgetful of the dinner growing cold for him at home, he turned his horse's head down the manse lane and alighted at the old stone gates. Bob, being well accustomed to his quarters, submitted to the loose throwing of the reins over the convenient bridle-post, and contentedly began to munch the fresh leaves of the pink hawthorn while his master opened the wicket-gate and strode up the little avenue to the house. The manse garden was a shady and woody place, the high shrubberies shutting out the smooth lawn before the door; had Brian caught an earlier glimpse of the scene being enacted there, it is probable he would somewhat hastily have beaten a retreat.

When he came within full view, a dark flush overspread his face, and his brow hastily clouded. The scene, pretty and suggestive in its way, evidently did not commend itself to him.

On a low garden-chair, just by the old sundial, sat a young lady in a close-fitting grey gown, her white hat on the grass beside her, and a look of vivid and lovely interest on her face.

I use the word lovely because it is most expressive of her look at the moment. Usually her face was too passive and unexpressive to be called lovely; it was only when, as now, something stirred her to quick emotion that it gained the necessary touch of life. It was, however, a beautiful face, regular in feature, faultless in tint, and striking too in its way,

suggestive to the close observer of an unusual amount of hidden possibility. It was a strong and sweet face ; strength, perhaps, predominated. Many admired and respected Helen Lockhart ; those who approached her near enough to love her, lavished upon her a most passionate devotion. She was so unaffected, so candid, so absolutely true. Some less candid and true felt uncomfortable in her presence, and blamed her prudishness ; but those were the few. Through the length and breadth of her father's parish Helen Lockhart was adored, regarded indeed as a " perfect woman, nobly planned." Yet she had her faults, which will unfold themselves unconsciously as the story of her life goes on. When Brian Laidlaw, her faithful lover of a lifetime, saw who had brought that sweet, loving light into her face, a fierce agony smote him to the heart.

At her feet, in the attitude and wearing the expression of a lover, knelt a man of such striking appearance, that if a woman can be won solely by external attributes, then Brian's chance was small. He was, if less strong and manly, yet of infinitely more grace, while his head was of that noble type with which we are wont to associate intellect of the highest order ; and the face was the face of a poet, set in its frame of wavy dark hair, the eyes liquid and dreamy, the nostrils delicately cut, the mouth nervously sweet. A womanish face, perhaps, yet not without its latent strength, its promise of future development. His attitude, being that of a lover, had something passionate and pleading in it which appeared to awaken a tender responsive chord in the soul of the woman to whom it was addressed.

Upon this scene, then, came Brian, the rough and ready, like a sudden chill rising from a cloud in a sunny sky. He purposely trod the gravel fiercely under foot ; then Helen saw him, and rose somewhat hurriedly, her composure distinctly disturbed. Her companion picked himself up in a most leisurely fashion, and elevated his eyebrows as he gave the intruder a nod of recognition.

" Oh, Brian, good-evening," Helen said, rather tremblingly. She was sensitive to a degree, and noted the ominous cloud on Brian's brow. " Surely you came quietly. Are you riding ? "

"Yes. I walked up the avenue as usual," replied Brian curtly. "How are you, Woodgate? I didn't hear you were expected."

"I wasn't. I never am expected anywhere, my dear boy," replied Woodgate carelessly, as they shook hands. "I'm a law unto myself. And how is the world using you?"

"I have no complaint to make," said Brian, and for the life of him could say no more. Though these two had known each other since boyhood, had sat on the same bench, played the same games, and shared every boyish pursuit, they were more antagonistic to each other than the merest strangers.

"The last I heard of you, you were going to Africa," said Brian, striving for Helen's sake to throw off the restraint which seemed to bind his tongue. "Have you come to make some stay in the old place, which, I suppose, seems slow enough to you now?"

"That depends, I suppose, on—on Helen, shall I say?" said Woodgate pointedly, and Helen flushed all over.

"Then, if it depends on Helen, your stay will be indefinitely prolonged," said Brian, with a kind of snap. "She is nothing if not hospitable, as we both know."

For the first time Laidlaw became conscious that he was roughly attired, that his gaiters were mud-bespattered, and the contrast between him and the artistically-attired Londoner, whose velvet coat and delicate necktie, arranged with a careless though studious grace, proclaimed that he was not above personal vanity, of which Laidlaw was singularly free. Yet he always looked the true and honest gentleman he was.

"I must ask you to excuse my attire, Helen," he said, with a short laugh. "But I was called up Rule Water before day-break this morning, and have not been home since. Is your father in the house?"

"Yes, Brian; do come in and see him," said Helen, with alacrity, glad of anything to relieve the tension of the moment.

"No, thanks; I must go on. My father will be out of all patience for his dinner," said Brian. "Perhaps you would

kindly tell the minister that Mrs. Watson at Caving is seriously ill, and that I am doubtful of her recovery. They'd like to see him, I know. Good-evening, Woodgate. I suppose you'll be giving us a look in at Broadrule before you go. Seen Guy since you came?"

"No; I only arrived this afternoon," replied Woodgate. "Give the doctor my kind regards; and tell him, in spite of his gloomy forebodings, I'm not a complete wastrel yet."

Helen gave a nervous little laugh. Brian smiled a trifle grimly, raised his hat, and walked away.

The pair left on the lawn were curiously silent until they heard the short, sharp click of the horse's foot sound on the hard, dry road. Then Woodgate gave his shoulders an expressive shrug.

"Poor Laidlaw! How true it is that a silken purse cannot be made out of a sow's ear!"

"What do you mean, Richard?" asked Helen quickly, and with a trace of irritation which rather surprised him.

"You understand me very well, dear Helen, though you affect otherwise," he said lightly. "Laidlaw was always a boor, and the boy was father to the man. But the poor fellow has had but small opportunity for self-improvement—administering the useful but homely drug to the natives of this primitive dale."

Helen's eyes flashed. She was not so completely carried away by the more meretricious attractions of Woodgate as to be unable to resent such an aspersion cast upon her old and true friend Brian, whom she dearly loved.

"Brian is a splendid fellow, Richard, and you know it. He may not be clever enough to write books, but he has already attained a high reputation in his own profession; and he does so much good unostentatiously in the parish, never sparing himself a moment's trouble or fatigue, that we can never be grateful enough or admire him enough for it."

Woodgate perceived that he had made a slight mistake, and hastened to repair it.

"I meant no disparagement to Brian, for whom I assure you I have the highest respect, only I must hold to my contention

that he is a diamond in the rough. But don't let our first quarrel be over this estimable mutual friend. You should be more lenient to me to-night, Helen, seeing I have before me the very trying ordeal of having to ask papa."

His tone of gentle banter made Helen's colour quickly rise, and she averted her conscious eyes.

"I wonder if it will be a surprise to him, Richard."

"A surprise, possibly ; but a happy one, I trust," said Woodgate complacently ; and Helen could not repress a smile. He was inordinately vain, and though indulgent to all his little weaknesses, she was not unobservant of them. He did not, indeed, credit her with the actual keenness of vision and nicety of perception she possessed. She was an interesting study to the man whose business in life it was to dissect human character and analyse human motive. The pure, wholesome life she had lived for five-and-twenty years in her native dale had infused its freshness into her being, and while close contact with many simple and earnest souls had kept her affections and sympathies wide and warm, yet the comparative narrowness of her environment had not failed to give to her character a Puritan touch in which Woodgate delighted. It was because she was in all respects so different from the women of his world that he had chosen her to be his companion, asked her to be his wife. It was a favourite pastime of his idle hours picturing his stately meadow lily transplanted to the more arid soil of London, and anticipating the gathering wonder with which the change would encompass her soul. He loved her in his way ; how much or how little his way involved, this history may afterwards reveal. Meanwhile, if he was a little different from the ideal lover of whom Helen in her girlhood had dreamed, that did not grieve her, and she accounted herself honoured among women. For Woodgate, the sometime charge and pupil of the minister of Broadrule, had already made a name for himself in the world of letters, a volume of poems winning for him the title of the New Poet, and a novel full of artistic beauty and literary grace made the world impatient for its successor. His reputation was in the freshness of its early promise, and his old-time friends—

Helen among them—were reverent in their worship of his genius. She was very humble in those early days, the glory of her hero-worship yet undimmed. That one so gifted and so sought after should have remembered her, and offered her his love, filled her soul with a wonder of humility and gratitude. He had certainly stirred her heart and won her promise, though she had never analysed her feelings towards him. She was a cultivated woman, but in her humility placed herself far beneath him, not presuming to be his equal—the height of her ambition to fill some niche in his life, and so aid him to the full perfection of his work. She had a reverence for intellect, and regarded his message as divine. In her simplicity she dwelt high upon the heights, looking upon the ideal, so difficult always to attain, with vision quite undimmed. Her simple, undisguised worship, her utter belief in him, was sweet to Woodgate, vanity being his besetting sin. The subtle incense of the world's praise had saturated his being, and there were some who, while recognising his genius, shook their wise heads, knowing that self-complacency kills the noblest aim. A few sterner spirits were not loth to declare that the new poet's best work was done; but no such presentiment troubled the soul of Woodgate. His belief in himself was unassailable; he felt assured that his future held only achievement more brilliant than the past.

He did not believe what many wise men have proved, that the growth of a fine soul can be stopped, its development choked by the weeds of selfishness, of indolence, of vain-glorious ease. Those heavenly voices which resound clear and sweet and strong in a pure atmosphere, have no divine cadence for the grosser ear.

The groveller cannot live upon the heights, the rarity of the atmosphere is irksome to him. The trouble is that it should be so much easier to grovel than to soar.

CHAPTER II

"Between two ways, two loves, two swift desires,
The human heart is torn."

LET us suppose for a moment, Helen, that your father should not prove amenable. What would be the result?" inquired Woodgate, by way of experiment.

He was fond of causing Helen to express an opinion unexpectedly. He never tired of studying her expressive face, of watching its play of light and shade. It clouded a little at the question, and her large, clear grey eyes became troubled.

"I don't think he will have any objection, Richard. Why should he? You are the son of the friend he loved best in the world, and you lived with us for seven years. Why, you are like one of us—or were once." She ended with a slight shy hesitation. "Of course it is a little different now, since you have become a famous man."

"But supposing that, out of some contradictory spirit, he should throw an obstacle in the way, my darling," persisted Woodgate; "what then?"

"I owe a very sacred duty to papa," said Helen quietly.

"Which means, I take it, that I should be bowled over, eh, Helen? Well, that seems rather cool."

Helen looked distressed, but said nothing. Woodgate did not, however, for a moment believe that Helen would hesitate between her father and himself. He was too certain of his

influence over her. He knew in what school she had been reared, and that she believed the duty of the child to the parent almost absolute. He smiled as he pictured her complete disillusionment in the world to which her marriage would introduce her; the many gentle shocks which would evolve a new personality out of Helen Lockhart. He was a very clever man, and a keen student of human nature, but it did not strike him that nothing would eradicate her early training, and that her personality was already built upon too sure a foundation to be easily changed. He imagined her pliable; she was in reality, especially in matters of conscience, firm to the verge of obstinacy.

"Papa was very pleased when Gavin Douglas asked for Annie," said Helen suddenly. "I remember yet how his voice shook when he said he could not, even if he would, have chosen a better husband for her; and, indeed, they are very happy."

"Are they?" inquired Woodgate, with an indifference almost rude, which caused Helen to look at him in quick inquiry.

"Do you not think so?"

Woodgate shrugged his shoulders.

"They may be. It depends entirely on what constitutes happiness; but you will admit that they stand on a slightly different platform from you and me."

"Gavin is not clever, of course, except in his own domain, but he is good," said Helen slowly; and her lips parted in a slight smile as she thought of her young sister's happy home, where lavish hospitality was dispensed, and where laughter and happy nonsense were never forbidden guests.

"You and your sister are opposite as the poles, Helen," said Woodgate meaningly. "A soul which has awakened to the higher possibilities of life can never again be satisfied with grosser surroundings. Let Mr. and Mrs. Gavin Douglas be happy in their own way, we shall not grudge them such things as they have. I cannot promise you, perhaps, quite so easy or luxurious a life, but we shall have our compensations."

"Oh, I know, I know," cried Helen impulsively; "I under-

stand you quite. But how dreadful if, after a time, you should be disappointed in me!"

Her voice sank to a nervous whisper, for she was giving utterance, for the first time, to a fear which haunted her perpetually.

"Now, my darling, after all I have said to prove to you that your personality will give the finishing touch to my life, your influence the crown to my endeavour, that is rather hard," said Woodgate, uneasily enough, for her humility touched him. "You may trust me to make no error in judgment in such a crisis of my life, though it is just here, I know, that so many men take a false step, which they never can retrieve."

"But I am so unworthy. I know so little," repeated Helen, with the sweet humbleness of a woman who loved. "Surely among all the great ladies you know, there are many worthier to be your wife than I."

"My dear Helen, I do know a great many charming, gifted, and fascinating women; but it is not to such a man turns when he wants the rest of home. I knew very well what I was doing, cherishing your image in my heart. You I have proved; and I know that you will make an ideal mistress of an ideal home."

It was the most delicate and subtle flattery, by which it was impossible Helen could remain unmoved. She listened in happy silence while he drew the glowing picture of the future, of the loneliness which the sunshine of her presence was to dispel for ever. And he believed honestly what he said; he had a very high and true regard for the sweet woman by his side, though she had not as yet awakened the passion of his soul. He believed also that she would be a helpmeet to him in his literary course, a guiding star to keep him in the way of rectitude; and as regarded his power to make her happy, he had no misgiving at all. He was too innately a selfish man to allow such a thought to trouble him.

"I suppose," he said slowly, "since the unpleasant task has to be performed, it may as well be done at once. You are quite sure your father has no suspicion of my errand?"

"I am quite sure. I am afraid papa thinks I am not likely to leave him in a hurry; and, indeed, he will be very lonely without me."

"'For this cause,'" quoted Woodgate lightly. "If he gives his consent, you will not refuse to come to me soon, Helen. I have set my heart on spending the dark months of the year abroad."

Helen started. It was all so new to her, and to hear him speak of an early marriage gave her something of a shock. Events in the quiet dale followed each other in so leisurely a fashion that there was ample time always to grow familiar with a new idea.

"Why should we wait?" urged Woodgate. "We are old enough to make the experiment; and if we love each other, the waiting is bound to be tedious. Oh, I know what you would say, Helen. I know the awful conventionalities of this delectable land. But as your new life will introduce you to an entirely new order of things, why not begin appropriately? I intend to ask Mr. Lockhart to give you to me not later than Christmas."

"Christmas, Richard? Little more than three months hence! Why, Gavin and Annie were engaged two years."

Woodgate laughed outright. It was so like one side of Helen—that strict regard for the conventional sequence of events.

"Well, well, we shall see. But I shall not wait two years, nor one, I tell you that, Helen," he said firmly. "And now I go to beard the lion in his den."

All unconscious of the momentous question about to be propounded to him, the minister of Broadrule was enjoying the quiet of the twilight hour in his study, smoking the pipe of peace, and leisurely developing his Sunday morning's discourse. The Rev. Edward Lockhart was a student and a scholar, though neither a bookworm nor a recluse. While loving with an appreciative love the companionship of his books, he did not neglect the not less valuable and instructive study of his kind. His concern for the moral and temporal welfare of his flock, his practical interest in the details of common life, made him

trusted and valued in the home, as much as the tenderness, depth, and wisdom of his spiritual teaching made him revered in the pulpit. Such a combination is rare, and indicates gifts of the highest kind. His brethren bemoaned the fact that he should be content to bury himself in a remote country parish, ministering to the needs of a handful of simple folks, but they failed to move him from the place he loved. It was hallowed to him by many memories, as the scene of his too brief married life, the birthplace of his children; then he loved, and was loved by his people, and they understood him. A wider sphere offered him nothing to compensate for the loss of these things, therefore he remained.

Woodgate had a genuine respect for his old tutor, who, though tender and kind, always had been also somewhat strict in his upbringing of his old friend's orphan boy. He belonged to the older school, who exact implicit obedience, and who mingle a rare gentleness with an authority which is absolute. His daughters, though now women grown, one the mistress of her own house, still regarded him with awe and feared his disapproval. Knowing the character of the man with whom he had to deal, Woodgate was conscious of a slight embarrassment as he sought admission at the study door.

"Come in. Oh, it is you, Richard. No, you don't disturb me. This is an idle half-hour with me usually. Have you and Helen tired of each other?"

His clean-shaven, clear-cut, and strikingly handsome face brightened as Woodgate closed the door, and he promised himself an agreeable break in the course of his study, knowing what a brilliant talker the young man could be when the spirit moved him. The minister had an absorbing interest in the world of letters, and an intelligent knowledge of what was transpiring therein, and he was undeniably proud of his distinguished pupil.

"Shall we have a light? Perhaps we had better. I like to see the face of a speaker, and I hope you are going to entertain me, Richard, now you and Helen have fallen out. And how do you think Helen is looking?"

"Charming, as she always does," replied Woodgate sincerely. Mr. Lockhart, busy with the reading-lamp on the table, was not particularly struck by the remark.

"And what sent you flying northwards just now, Richard? I saw from several papers that you are contemplating a trip to Africa. Have you come to say good-bye?"

"No; the newspapers always know more of a fellow's intentions than he does himself," said Woodgate bluntly. "I know a party that starts for Mashonaland next month, and they asked me to join them, but I declined. That sort of thing has no attractions for me; I have no sporting proclivities, and I don't find native idiosyncrasies interesting. But I've come on a serious enough errand this time, sir, as you will doubtless think."

"Ay, and what is that?"

The minister turned up the lamp, and its soft white light fell full on Woodgate's face. He looked his best at the moment. Mr. Lockhart had the curious effect of forcing him to be natural, and making him lay aside the mannerisms which had become as second nature to him.

"Yes? Out with it, lad; confession is good for the soul," said the minister, as he stretched his hand towards the mantelpiece to lift his pipe; but the motion was arrested by Woodgate's next words—

"I have come to ask you for Helen."

"For Helen?" repeated the minister, looking down on him in evident bewilderment. "What for?"

"To be my wife! Is it possible such a thing has never suggested itself to your mind?"

Mr. Lockhart did not speak, but turned away to the window, where the blind was still undrawn, and upon which the last grey shaft of light lay tenderly, and he there stood in absolute silence for quite five minutes. He passed through a sharp experience in these five minutes, gained a victory over the selfishness of a devoted father's heart. When he turned again to Woodgate, who, though intensely nervous, did not dare to break the silence, his voice had lost its happy cadence, his face its unruffled peace.

"I suppose," he said slowly, "you have already spoken to Helen?"

"I have, and she has given me her promise—conditionally, of course, upon your approval."

"If that is so, then the matter is practically settled. Helen is not a frivolous person who acts impulsively. Let us sit down and talk it over."

Considerably astonished as well as relieved, Woodgate sat back in his chair, while the minister took his own seat, and even lifted his pipe and began to fill it.

Woodgate spoke first.

"It is right that I should satisfy you entirely regarding my financial position," he began. "You are aware what means my father left, and my income from my profession is considerable, and likely"—

The minister interrupted him by a slightly impatient wave of the hand.

"I don't wish to know these details, Richard; they don't much concern me. A moderate degree of poverty even, for Helen, I should not greatly dread. She has been simply reared, and she possesses, in a marked degree, the faculty of adaptation; but"—

He hesitated, and a slightly resentful expression appeared in Woodgate's face.

"I must ask an explanation of that 'but,' Mr. Lockhart. Is it possible that you can have any personal objection to *me*?"

Mr. Lockhart faintly smiled and pushed his slender fingers through his abundant grey hair.

"You are a great man, Richard, in the estimation of many besides yourself," he said, with a kind of gentle dryness, "and we in the Dale here have our own pride in you; but when a man is asked, as I now am, to part with his dearest treasure, it is natural that he should seek to strip the one who asks of all superfluous trappings and reach the heart of the man. Can you make Helen happy, Richard, do you think?"

The minister had a peculiarly keen and penetrating eye, and it was fully fixed on his listener's face as he spoke.

Woodgate did his best not to flinch, but he felt far from comfortable, and decidedly aggrieved.

"I can but do my best, and Helen appears to trust me," he said, rather curtly.

The minister read the working of his mind like an open book, and saw that this misgiving was wholly unpalatable. But that mattered but little to the father, who had his best-loved child's interest solely at heart.

"I cannot plead that you do not know each other sufficiently," he said slowly. "You have had exceptional opportunities of studying each other. But I will say this, and I suppose I am speaking to a man of the world, who will at once understand me. Helen has been quietly brought up, and her horizon is naturally a trifle prescribed. Don't you think the risk of transplanting her to a soil so foreign, and in many respects so uncongenial, a very great one?"

"I don't," replied Woodgate promptly. "It will be a full life, rich in many things she does not now dream of."

"I do not for a moment doubt that, Richard. The question is, would she consider them enrichers of life? I much doubt it. You cannot misunderstand me. Your life, with its untrammelled freedom, is in almost every respect antagonistic to what she has hitherto known; and I confess I cannot regard such a future for her without the gravest anxiety."

"You spoke a minute ago of Helen's adaptability," put in Woodgate eagerly. "Is this not a fine field for its exercise? What is there in her position as my wife to occasion you anxiety? She will at once take her own stand, and become the centre of an admiring and appreciative circle, in which her own best gifts will have fullest scope for development."

"I hope so, I hope so indeed," said the minister, but the shadow on his brow remained.

"I will be very frank with you, Richard, as I have the right to be at such a time. The faults of your youth, when you lived in this house, were not hid from me. The one which concerned me most, and which does concern me still, now more seriously than ever, is your natural disposition to put

self first always. Your success, I fear, may have helped to foster this besetting sin; but oh, lad, remember that in the marriage estate it is absolutely fatal to happiness. The best of women are apt, God knows, out of the sweetness of their own souls, to pander unconsciously to our selfishness. I can only implore you to uproot, or at least keep it in check. And for the rest, since Helen has passed her word, I can only say, God bless and help you both. May He deal with you, Richard Woodgate, as you deal with her."

CHAPTER III

"Yea, are my thoughts of thee most vigilant;
The cause is largely writ upon my heart."

AND now, Richard, we may discuss the details, if you like," said the minister, resuming his natural voice and sinking back in his chair. "Your home, of course, will be in London?"

"Yes, when we set it up," said Woodgate, also more naturally, for the solemnity of the past remarks was not agreeable to him. "But I should like to take a long holiday first. I don't think Helen would have any objection to travel, and we shall never have a better opportunity than at first, when we have no other ties."

"Ah!"

The monosyllable forced itself rather drily from the minister's lips, between two puffs of tobacco smoke.

"You would go abroad—where, and for how long?"

"Oh, six months, perhaps, supposing we married at Christmas"—

"At Christmas? Bless my soul, Richard, I wonder you dare sit there and propose any such thing. Why, it will take a year at least to grow accustomed to the idea of her departure. You cannot pretend that you are absolutely indispensable to each other; at anyrate, you have taken a good while to find it out."

Woodgate laughed, and looked yet more at his ease, finding this an easier mood to cope with.

"You are entitled to your little home-thrust, sir," he said. "I have always admired and cared for Helen, but the impulse to marry, I think, must always come upon a man suddenly. A chance word or look may suggest it to him, and then he wonders why he has so stupidly ignored it so long. I have no other explanation to offer of my tardiness in wooing; it is the true one."

The minister accepted it as such. He had no reason to doubt the young man's veracity, and he was too large-minded and generous himself to subject him to petty cross-examination regarding his past. He believed, indeed, that had Woodgate's life not been blameless, he would not have dared to approach Helen, nor would she have had any attraction for him. He had no anxiety whatever regarding the moral character of his old pupil, and the traits in his character were such as time and experience would mellow, and the influence of a woman like Helen smooth away. Such was the reasoning of a good man, whose lot had been cast in the simple walks of country life, where certainly evil walks with averted face.

"Do you mean to say, Richard, that Helen has even allowed you to mention Christmas as a possible date?"

"I did mention it to her."

"And what did she say?"

"That Douglas and Annie had been engaged two years; but I think I could persuade her."

"I see there is nothing left for me but to stand by meekly and see these great changes accomplished," said the minister, with a touch of humour not far removed from pathos. "Well, I can hardly picture the manse of Broadrule without Helen."

"But she will not be lost to you, sir," put in Woodgate, with genuine earnestness. "I don't intend to take her away for ever."

"I believe that your intentions are good," said Mr. Lockhart, "but a married daughter is a married daughter all the world over. How often does Mrs. Douglas come here? or what interest has she without the walls of Broadyards? Your wife will be just the same; nor would I wish it otherwise. There

is one thing I should like to say to you about Helen, Richard, and that is, that you must be gentle at first with her prejudices. She knows absolutely nothing of the world, and it will be a great revelation to her. If she should seem at first inclined to rebel against what she does not understand, you must be very gentle with her. She is one of the sweetest-tempered women, but strong-willed to a degree."

Woodgate smiled. He thought he knew Helen well, and that this advice, if not absolutely uncalled for, was at least exaggerated.

"I think Helen and I will 'gree,' as they say here, very well. I am not bad-tempered myself."

"Hasty, I think; a trifle hasty. And you like your own way as well as any of us," put in the minister quietly. "Well, I will say no more on that head. I hope you have enough of sense between you to make the best of everything. And now, tell me what you have been about lately. When is *Firstfruits* to have a successor?"

"Faith, I don't know. I am afraid I am incorrigibly lazy. You see, it is no joke writing up to a newly-acquired reputation. The critics are confoundedly on the alert. It is a great temptation to a man to rest on the laurels he has won."

"Not at nine-and-twenty, Richard, I think," said Mr. Lockhart. "What you have already achieved should be but an earnest of better things to come. At least, your best friends hope so, Helen among them. You will have an appreciative wife, Richard, who will spur you on to the highest endeavour; and that is much."

"I don't know," said Woodgate, a little doubtfully. "In his home relations a man wants a rest—wants to get away from all the bugbears that haunt him outside. I should not relish a critic and a mentor always by my side. It would inevitably become irksome."

"But you would not like a wife who took no interest in your pursuits?"

"Well, no; but I should like one who believed in me absolutely."

"Oh, well, Helen does, and will, unless you disillusion her. But I warn you that she is very clear-sighted, and relentless in her condemnation of humbug. And now, how long are you going to stay? Brian and Guy will be anxious to see you."

"I saw Brian to-night, and he did not appear specially elated," said Woodgate drily.

"Brian? where? Has he been here?"

"He was in the garden about an hour ago, with some message for you about a sick woman. I don't think Laidlaw improves as he grows older. He has undeniable talent in his own profession, and it is a pity he does not seek a wider sphere."

"He never will; but what do you mean by saying he does not improve? I see no room for improvement. He is one of the finest fellows God ever made."

"Oh, I grant that he has a good heart, but the outward man lacks polish. He was quite bearish this evening."

"Perhaps he had reason. There is no doubt that Helen's marriage, when it takes place, will be a fearful disappointment to him," said the minister, betrayed into an expression of opinion he immediately regretted, though it was not a new idea to Woodgate.

"Granted; but he might be generous enough to rejoice over a friend's good luck," said Woodgate. "I don't think I shall stay, meantime. In fact, I can't. I have a dinner engagement I must keep on Friday."

"And this is Wednesday. You must leave to-morrow, then? Hardly fair that to us."

"I'm very sorry, sir, but I shall return soon," said Woodgate, not saying that he would only be too glad to escape the conventional congratulations of sundry neighbours. "Have I your consent, then, to press for an early marriage? I have a piece of work in view which must be written abroad, and I should not like to go this time without Helen."

"I suppose, if you have both made up your minds, there is nothing left for me but to fall in," said the minister, as he rose.

"We can talk over this again after I have seen Helen. You will not leave till to-morrow night, at least. Send Helen to me as you go out. I suppose she will not be far away."

Woodgate felt himself a trifle peremptorily dismissed, and at once left the room, a little disappointed at the manner of his reception. He really believed that he was conferring a great honour on the country manse. He did not feel in a mood even for Helen's society, and, instead of seeking her, took his cap from the hall-stand and passed out into the garden by the front door. Hearing the sound, Helen, who had been waiting in the drawing-room, ran nervously downstairs, too late, however, to see him. She was standing irresolute on the last step, when the study door opened, and her father called her—

"Come here, Helen."

She obeyed him tremblingly, almost like a child convicted of a fault. Demonstrations of feeling were not common in that reserved and placid household, but it was no common moment. The minister drew her to him, laid his hands on her shoulders, and looked into her face with a searching and peculiar tenderness. The resemblance between them was then seen to be singularly striking.

"I thought my cares about my motherless girls were over when I gave Annie to Gavin Douglas. Perhaps they are only beginning, Helen."

"Oh, papa, why do you say so?" cried Helen, with a mingling of apprehension and womanly shyness. "Do you—do you not like Richard, whom we have known so long, and of whom we have all grown so proud?"

The minister could not look into that pleading, upturned face and give voice to the misgivings of his soul.

"My dear, my dear," he said unsteadily, "we may like a man very well, and be very proud of him too; but when it comes to giving him what is our dearest on earth, it is a very different matter."

"Oh, if it is only that!" she said, with evident relief. "You have never called me that before, papa. Am I then so dear to you?"

"I did not know, my daughter, till I had to face the possibility of giving you up, how my soul clave to you. If you be to the man you have chosen a wife such as the daughter you have been to me, he will be indeed blessed."

"And Richard, dear papa—have you nothing to say about him? Surely you are pleased! I only fear I may disappoint him. I am such a plain, unintellectual person."

"Hush!" There was real sternness in the minister's tone as he put his hand on her lips. "You are more than worthy, and he very well knows it. You have chosen your lot in life, my dear, and it may be that the Lord has a great work for you to do in another sphere. But we in this quiet spot will miss you, Helen, how sadly we shall not know till you have gone away."

There was more sadness than elation in his voice as he spoke, and Helen's heart was too full to speak. She felt for the first time the bitterness of conflicting loves. Never had the father she revered seemed so dear, never had the simple harmony of their placid life seemed so exquisite a thing. For the moment the lover and the ideal life suffered by comparison. The one she had proved, and loved because she had proved it, while from the other the hand of experience alone would lift the veil.

"The lights of Broadrule," said the minister, as he put his hand on the blind to shut out the night. "If I mistake not, there will be a sorer heart there than here when Helen Lockhart bids good-bye to Teviotdale. But there is Richard in the garden, waiting, I suppose, for you. Go to him, my darling, and take my blessing with you."

He kissed her once, and gently put her from the room. He was a man of deep feeling, which as a rule he kept under curb, but he felt his composure leaving him, and did not wish to sadden Helen by his distress. He locked the door after her, and went down upon his knees, conscious of a load lying upon his soul, and fain to lay it, as he had laid many a burden through a long life, at the foot of the Cross. Helen, agitated and far from happy, went to the front door, and Woodgate at once caught sight of her.

"Where can I get you a shawl, Helen? Let us stay out of doors."

She stepped back, took a wrap from the cloakroom, and joined him, closing the door behind her. He drew her hand within his arm, and they walked down the dark avenue in silence.

"Well, Helen, it was a pretty severe ordeal," he said presently. "I confess I was disappointed. What did he say to you?"

"Not much," replied Helen tremulously. "It is natural, of course, that he should be downcast a little at the idea of being left. I am all he has."

"There was something more than that," said Woodgate, a trifle discontentedly. "Were the thing not too absurd to be entertained, I should say he distrusted me. He certainly gave me that impression. I have a rival in Laidlaw, I know very well. I wonder if he has been speaking disparagingly of me to your father?"

In the darkness Helen's colour rose. "Why will you be so unjust to Brian, Richard? He is incapable of such a thing."

"He looked at me to-night, anyhow, as if he'd like to show fight. But, poor beggar, I must not be too hard on him, seeing he has lost what I have won."

"I think papa and you both make a mistake. I am sure Brian likes me as a friend only, just as he has always done."

"Oh, you will say that, of course," said Woodgate lightly; "but you don't believe it. Well, I think, Helen, I shall gain my point, even with your stern parent. Shall we fix the day now?—twenty-fourth of December, or Christmas Day, if you will. Did papa give his consent to that?"

"He did not refuse."

"I wish I could take you away now out of all the fuss and nonsense, and that we could be married quietly where nobody knows us."

"But that is impossible. There are some friends we must consider as well as ourselves, Richard."

"Oh yes, I know what I have to go through," said Woodgate, with affected amusement. "I shall have to run the gauntlet of

the whole Dale's disapproval, but old Madam Douglas is the chief bugbear. Heavens! what a tongue the old lady has, and how mortally she hates me!"

"Oh, Richard, how can you?" said Helen reprovingly. "It is because you contradict her so badly that she talks at you. She is very nice and amiable too if you take her the right way"—

"Yes, but why should I?" queried Woodgate whimsically. "You conciliate everybody, Helen, and it doesn't pay. You'll have to be a trifle more discriminating by and by, or I don't know what will become of us. I think Madam Douglas an insufferable old woman, and if your sister didn't calmly ignore her, Broadyards would soon be a pandemonium. Don't look so distressed, my darling. I'll do anything to please you, even consent to be presented at a family dinner-party, if you say the word."

"I suppose there must be something of the kind. Madam Douglas gave one when Gavin and Annie were engaged," said Helen; and again Woodgate smiled. Her simple, unquestioning regard for all that was conventional and proper amused him more and more.

"Well, it can't be on this occasion, for I must leave to-morrow, being engaged to dine at the Parthenon Club on Friday night, but I shall come back as soon as I can to do what is required in the way of being trotted out."

The talk of such a speedy departure turned the conversation into other and more lover-like grooves, and for the time being everything disagreeable and unwelcome was forgotten.

CHAPTER IV

"The bond is sweet, my father,
It tastes of heaven."



LD Doctor Laidlaw, enjoying his after-dinner pipe on the doorstep of his house at Broadrule, was amazed to behold his son galloping up the road as if a witch pursued him.

"Now, what on earth does the rascal mean, I wonder?" he said half aloud. "There's been trouble up Rule Water this day, and that's how he lays the thing to heart."

He took a tremendous puff at his long churchwarden, and sauntered round the end of the house to be ready for the rascal when he should ride up to the stable gates.

"He's coming, Tom," he said to the groom cleaning harness at the carriage-house door; "and I'll warrant ye Bob will be in a bonnie mess. Ye can get your pails ready."

Then he went out to the gate and there stood, a portly figure in the ruddy evening light, wearing a light grey tweed suit and a fine white waistcoat, across which dangled an old-fashioned chain and seals. His face was round and ruddy as a winter apple, and his remnant of white hair made a neat fringe under the edge of his gaudy smoking-cap, which he wore jauntily, as if he thought it very becoming to him. The old doctor was a deal more dainty and fastidious about his dress than the young one, and he looked the very picture of

the jolly old country gentleman he was. His whole face shone as he watched the horse and rider rapidly covering the road; his pride in his gallant boy was very unaffected and unconcealed. It showed itself in every look and tone and act, even in the wholesome counsel and reproof which he thought fit at times to administer when occasion required. He was the one child of his old age, the only legacy left by the bright-eyed Irish girl who had lived only twelve months after she had come a bride from Erin to the quiet parish of Broadrule. Burying his heart-sorrow as best he might, the old doctor found his best consolation in the rearing of his boy; and they had been chums in the truest sense of the word, since the days when the little Brian, sitting straight and proud on his Shetland's back, rode by his father's side as he went his rounds. It was a sight both pretty and pathetic, which had moved many a tender woman's heart to pity for the pair; but the old doctor sought no second mistress for the house of Broadrule. The relationship between father and son was almost perfect; tiffs they had in plenty, both being hot-tempered to a degree, but never a sting was left behind. Brian's college career had been a long series of triumphs, and when, crowned with honours, he came home to take the burden off his father's shoulders, the old man felt that he could say with Simeon, "Lord, now lettest thou Thy servant depart in peace."

Many pitied the two lonely men, living with only servants about them in that big old family house, but they wanted nobody's pity, and did not know what loneliness meant.

The village of Broadrule was a quaint, picturesque, old-world spot, built in the English fashion squarely round the village green. In the middle of the green grew sundry flourishing beech-trees which afforded shade to the village politicians who met of an evening to discuss the affairs of the nation, and the homely gossip of the country-side. It was a peaceable, sleepy, contented little place; almost ideal in its simplicity of life. As was to be expected, the doctor's abode was the "big house" of the place, and the two doctors the

objects of universal respect and esteem. Perhaps it was a narrow sphere, as some said, but it had its rich compensations in the unswerving love of many simple but genuine hearts. It was none too narrow, anyhow, for Brian Laidlaw, who was perfectly contented with his lot, and envied no man his wider sphere. When he caught sight of his father waiting for him that night, he allowed the slightly aggrieved Bob to relapse into his favourite easy trot; but the somewhat gloomy expression of his face did not relax, even when he encountered the old gentleman's keenly inquiring gaze.

"Well, lad," said the old doctor, as he laid his hand anxiously on the bridle, "was the poor body beyond your aid?"

"Oh no," answered Brian, suffering his face to clear. "She'll do if they take care of her. I thought this a case requiring our intervention, dad, so I stopped at Cavering and telegraphed to Edinburgh for a nurse. It's a valuable life, and we must do what we can to save it. Poor Watson's gratitude when I gave him some hope was quite touching."

"You're a clever chap, Brian, and a good chap, which is, maybe, better," said the old man; and Brian laughed as he swung himself from his saddle.

"Here, Tom, give him a wash down and a good feed; he deserves it," he said to the groom, and gave the animal a kindly pat as he turned away.

"What were you fleein' up the road at sic a gait for?" asked the old doctor. "For a' the world as if the deil pursued ye."

"Perhaps he did," replied Brian. "Aren't you famished for your dinner?"

"I've had it an hour ago and more. At my age, lad, a man can't make a fool of his stomach with impunity, as you'll find out yourself some fine day. But yours is waiting for you."

"I don't think I mind about it," said Brian absently.

"What for no? Are ye by eating? Like enough you've gone the whole day on an empty stomach."

"No, I had a plate of kail and a bit oatcake, with a nip of whisky, at Cavering, and very good they were too. Anybody would think me a gomeril or a bairn, father, to hear ye."

Often when alone they relapsed into the broad Scotch both loved, though both could, when necessary, use the polished English of the most cultivated society.

"Ye are neither, lad, neither, only thrawn whiles. But ye'll eat your dinner this night if I should feed you mysel'."

"Oh, I'll eat it fast enough. Faith, I feel tired now. I've had a long day. I hope there's no messages?"

"Nothing but what can wait," said the old man, as they passed into the house. Brian hastily refreshed himself with a wash, and took off his boots; then his father sat by him at the table watching him eat, and eager to hear the details of the operation Brian had that day performed, alone and unaided. He was a cool and even daring surgeon, and the old man's interest in these cases bordered on the keenest excitement. He was secretly amazed at his son's surgical skill, though he sometimes thought him rash.

"I say, Woodgate is at the manse, father," said Brian presently, breaking off in the middle of their talk.

"Woodgate, is he? When did he come? How did you hear?"

"I saw him. I looked in at the manse to tell the minister to go up to Mrs. Watson."

"Oh, you saw him, did you? And how does our young bantam look? Does he crow as crouse as ever?"

The tone—dry, keen, sarcastic—indicated in what light the old doctor regarded the great man from London.

"I don't see much difference in that way," said Brian, with a laugh. "He's a good-looking chap, dad, only he knows it too well. I say, just look who that is at the gate. I'm not going out another foot this night, mind, unless it's mortal trouble."

"It is not, though, only Guy; the bairn'll hae a sair wame," said the old doctor rather broadly. "Here he is."

There came into the room at the moment, with all the unceremonious freedom of a privileged friend, a sturdy, well-built, yeoman-looking fellow, with a pleasant, open countenance and a twinkling eye, which betokened a merry heart;

and truly Gavin Douglas, Laird of Broadyards, and heir to Teviothead and his mother's money-bags, the husband of a charming wife, and the father of a strong heir, respected in the Dale alike for his substance and his personal worth, had but little to make him heavy of heart.

"Good-evening, doctor," he said cheerily to the old man as he laid his driving-gloves unceremoniously on the white cloth. "Bless me, Brian, are you only at your dinner, and it's after seven! I've come to take you back to Broadyards, my man. Willy nilly, ye maun go."

"What for? I just said this moment to dad that only mortal trouble would take me out of the house again this night; and it's not that at Broadyards, I can see."

"Oh no; neither mortal nor serious, thank Providence. Only the baby has a cough, and Annie would give me no peace. I say, doctor, it's no easy job being goodman to a woman wi' ae bairn. I'm for no good in this world this while back but to fetch and carry for his wee lairdship and his mother," he said comically, yet with a certain air of pride, which showed that he rather enjoyed it.

"I suppose I'd better go," said Brian, as he took a bite of cheese to finish his repast.

His father looked at him a trifle reproachfully. Very easily could Brian have gone to the surgery and made up a cough mixture for such a simple ailment; but Brian did not want an excuse. In his present frame of mind he rather dreaded a long, quiet evening with his father; tired though he was, he would rather be out of doors.

"How have you come, Guy?" he asked.

"In the dogcart, and I'll bring you back. But you'll not grudge us an hour or two of Brian, doctor? It's not often we can catch him now."

"Faith, that's true, my man; but he's needin' his bed the night," said the old man. "He's little more than a lodger here; but it's a providence that he has health and strength and heart for his work, just as I had at his age."

"Hear him now! There's a good day's work in you yet,

doctor, if you were put to it, and Brian would let you ; but he's insatiable for work."

"Deed is he," said the old man, following his son with admiring eyes as he quitted the room. "I'm as rusty as a barn-door hinge, Guy," he added confidentially, and touching the laird's arm with his hand—the wrinkled, trembling hand which once had been as skilful and gentle as Brian's own. "He's an unco chield. He's just been tellin' me what he did this day to a poor body up the hills. An', would you believe it, Guy, I canna aye follow him. He's got that many new-fangled names for things, let alone new-fangled notions, an' he fears naething. Gie him a knife an' he'll cut if it should be bend leather."

"Ay, but he knows what he is about. You never hear of Brian making a mistake," said the laird. "Come out and see my new mare, doctor ; she's the nicest bit of horseflesh in the Dale at this moment, I could bet a fiver."

"Another new one, Guy ? Where did you get her ?" queried the doctor eagerly.

"Reared her myself. Your man says she's a beauty. I broke her myself too, and she's as quiet as a lamb to ride and drive. I meant her for my wife's riding, but she won't look at her. Nothing in her head but babies ; she can't look at anything else."

The doctor laughed, and they passed out into the pleasant September twilight and sauntered to the gate, where Tom the groom was admiringly regarding the smart dogcart and the new mare. She was, indeed, a lovely piece of horseflesh, and the doctor, himself no mean judge, regarded her dainty points with silent ecstasy.

"She's a beauty, and no mistake. Brian will break the tenth commandment presently when he sees her. I say, what's brought Woodgate here just now ?"

This sudden question took Guy entirely by surprise, but before he could reply, Brian had joined them, and the talk reverted to the mare. The old doctor watched them drive away out of sight presently, and then went back to his study

and his pipe, thinking tenderly of the two lads, who were both dear to him, and whose warm friendship was a thing which had always pleased him mightily. He was somewhat troubled, however, and he could not tell why, about Woodgate being at the manse. In some subtle way Brian's heaviness of soul had communicated itself to him, and he found less solace than usual in his pipe.

"Did you know Woodgate had come to the manse, Guy?" asked Brian, as they bowled swiftly along the road, the mare keeping her lovely head well up and sniffing the sweet evening air with keen delight.

"No, I didn't, till your father mentioned it just now," said Broadyards. "Helen was over this morning, but she never mentioned it. Awfully close is Helen when she likes."

"Rather think he came unexpectedly."

"Um! Unexpected and uninvited, like our snell east winds," said the laird gruffly. "I say, Brian,"—he hesitated a moment, and then out with it,—“don't let that bookmaking chap take away Helen."

"I doubt that's his errand," Brian answered, with half-averted head.

"But *don't* let him," urged Broadyards, giving the mare an unexpected flick with the whip which set her quivering in every limb. "Don't you want to keep her here? I could have sworn you did."

"I do. Heaven knows I do!" said Brian passionately. "But I doubt he's in the running this time, not I."

"Well, I think you're a fool, Brian, upon my honour, I do, if you let that whipper-snapper step in and lift Helen from before your nose. I thought you'd more pluck in you than that. Why, everybody knows he isn't fit for her, and that she was made for Broadrule."

Brian smiled a trifle drearily. This masterful style of talk was all very well for Guy, whose course of love had run smoothly from start to finish. But though Helen and Annie were sisters, they were cast in a different mould.

"He's got the things women care for," he said, just a trifle

savagely. "Fine soft manners and flattering words; and, unless my eyes deceived me to-night, the girl put the odds on a chap like me, who has nothing to offer her but an honest heart and a pair of willing hands."

Broadyards deliberately swore under his breath, though not addicted to strong language, except under the severest provocation.

"I'd have her yet, Brian. You're on the spot, and can conduct the siege. If Helen chooses him in preference to you, all I can say is, she richly deserves the hard bed she'll have to lie on; but I won't believe it till I see them married. Helen would never be such a fool."

Brian remained silent, but quite unconvinced; and his silence irritated his friend, who had all that concerned him so truly at heart.

"You won't let him have an easy walk over; promise me that," he pursued eagerly. "I can't stand the fellow—never could stand him, even when a boy, and now he makes my gorge rise."

"Let's talk of something else, Guy," said Brian quickly. "All the talk in the world will never mend that matter. Though I'd give my right hand willingly to see Helen Lockhart at Broadrule, the day'll never come—that I know, my lad, right well."

CHAPTER V

"A little rift within the lute."



WOODGATE left the manse next morning. Now that the object of his visit was accomplished, he seemed eager to be gone; the engagement at the Parthenon was not important, seeing it was a weekly institution, at which each member was bound to read something original, and Woodgate had already twice fulfilled that obligation, and would not be called on for some time. But he allowed Helen to think the engagement imperative, and departed with many apologies and many regrets. He was by no means an ardent lover, though he believed that he honestly cared for Helen above all women. Her answer had filled him with a calm satisfaction; and as the train bore him southwards through the rolling masses of the Cheviot Hills, he told himself that he had done well by himself and the Lockharts. They had been kind friends to him, giving him a home in his orphan boyhood, and no man could now say he had not richly acknowledged that debt. In giving Helen a position such as she would not otherwise have aspired to, he felt that he was also supplying himself with a kind of sheet-anchor to steady himself before the shifting winds of a thoroughly Bohemian life. There were one or two pages in that life he would not wish Helen ever to read; she would never know of them; under her pure guidance he would become a model. So

he lightly ruminated as he watched his cigarette smoke curling through the carriage window, and gave himself up to visions of married life in which his beautiful wife, so perfectly natural and sincerely truthful, so womanly and so gracious, should awaken wonder in the souls of the men and women of his acquaintance. He told himself that he had never showed his genius and his sense of artistic fitness more conspicuously than in his choice of a wife. A man may have tender passages, may whisper love-nonsense to many women, but the wise man when choosing a wife avoids such, and seeks the pearl of true womanhood, somewhat rarer to find, perhaps, in these artificial days than of yore. So Woodgate, in a truly complacent frame of mind, returned to his London haunts, having made a great upheaval in the quiet manse on the banks of the Teviot. Helen was left wondering a little at the sadness of her own heart. Her father had given his blessing; yet she felt none of that blissful elation which happy love, so crowned, is entitled to feel.

Woodgate left at two o'clock, being driven to Hallkirk Station by the minister himself. When he returned, he at once sought Helen, who was wandering about the house in a state of restlessness as painful as it was unusual with her.

"Put on your hat, Helen, and we'll walk over to Broadyards."

"To-day, papa?" she asked, with so evident a reluctance that he regarded her with surprise.

"Why, do you not wish your sister to know, my dear?"

"Yes, papa, of course; but need there be any hurry? It is best not to have such things too much talked of, and you know Madam is at Broadyards this week. and before to-morrow it will be through the Dale."

Somehow the speech irritated the good man, who, to tell the truth, had been somewhat put out already that morning by his talk with his future son-in-law. He was indeed a great deal more dissatisfied than he cared to own even to himself.

"And what although all the Dale should know by to-morrow? If the marriage is to be in such haste, the sooner it is known the better."

Helen's colour rose at this unusual tone, and her eyes became suspiciously moist.

"Papa, what can you mean? You talk as if I wished to marry someone who is not quite—quite respectable, instead of Richard, who it seems to me is honoured and appreciated everywhere as he deserves to be, except here, where he might be expected to have some true friends."

Helen's distressed manner melted him at once.

"My dear, I would not hurt you for the world, and I don't wish to cast any aspersions on Richard, who I am sure has many good qualities, though less humility than one likes to see in a young man. But you must remember that many in the Dale will bear him an everlasting grudge for taking you away, so you had best prepare yourself for it."

"You will not allow Madam to say stinging things to me, papa?" said Helen quickly. "If she does, I am afraid I shall be rude to her. She does not like Richard, and her tongue spares nobody; but I feel as if I could not bear very much to-day."

"My dear, I'll bridle the old lady's tongue at any cost," the minister said good-humouredly. "Get your hat, and don't look so doleful as if we were discussing a burying instead of a marrying."

As they sauntered across the lovely autumn fields and woods, following the winding course of the river to the house of Broad-yards, Helen was so plainly repressed and silent that her father had to make an effort to rouse her. Reflecting with a sigh that it was after all the happiest policy to make the best of disagreeable things (in that light did Mr. Lockhart regard his daughter's engagement to the rising author of the day), he deliberately set himself to look at the brighter side, and so began to talk with genial and appreciative criticism of the work Richard had done in the past—so full of promise that it justified the highest hopes for future achievement; and he managed to point out delicately, yet with force, what would be Helen's part in the future, to encourage, to stimulate, to spur on to higher endeavour. Listening to him, Helen's face cleared, her

eyes became exquisitely bright; it was a vision such as she herself entertained, a destiny of which she prayed God to make her worthy.

The discussion of this enchanting theme brought them, all too quickly it seemed to Helen, to the wicket gate giving entrance to the park of Broadyards. The riverside path was a right of way, and was always a pleasant walk; even in winter, when the snow lay thickly on the ground, the laird would send his men to clear the way right to the manse. Well might the minister think that his cares were over concerning the younger and more wayward of his motherless girls when he gave her to Gavin Douglas. The name, one of the oldest and most honoured in Scotland, was held in high esteem in the Dale, because it had been borne for many generations by an honest, manly, God-fearing race of men. Blunt of manner, and sometimes rude of speech, the Broadyards Douglasses had ever been, and the present laird was no exception to the rule. But he was kind of heart and true as steel; his word as good as his bond to the meanest servitor on his lands; generous to friends and magnanimous to foes, he was alike respected and beloved in his native dale. Broadyards was a large estate, and the mansion an imposing pile, fit abode for any great lady in the land. Old Madam, who at her son's marriage had retired to her dower house of Teviothead, had said that the new mistress had hardly sufficient dignity to gracefully supplant the old, but she had lived to change her mind. Annie Lockhart was small in stature and unimposing in appearance, but she could hold her own, and did too, even against the proud old lady, who had haughty Border blood in her veins, and had secretly thought her one son might have done better for himself. But she loved him dearly, and hated feuds; therefore, after one straight expression of her disapproval, one attempt to make him change his mind, she gave in, and abdicated in favour of the daughter of the manse. This was rendered a somewhat easier task by reason of her adoration of the minister, whom she regarded as the only perfect man that walked the earth. So on the whole the relations betwixt Teviothead and Broadyards were amicable

enough, though there had been many passages at arms between the old lady and the young one, especially regarding the rearing of the heir, in whose welfare Madam maintained her unassailable interest and concern. The old doctor was responsible for the somewhat Frenchified title of Madam, which had stuck to her after he had used it once or twice; and it pleased her, because it conferred the distinction she loved upon her personality.

Helen regarded her sister's lot as a happy one, but never for a moment envied her her great possessions. Annie's little airs, patronising and pretentious, though too graceful to be offensive, amused her infinitely, as did the skirmishes between her and Madam. Helen's ideal of married happiness did not centre in a fine house, a horde of servants, and other outward trappings of worldly prosperity. She was cast in a different mould, had inherited something of her father's dreamy, sensitive nature, and probed more deeply into the heart of things. She asked too much of life, and disappointment awaited her.

On that mild afternoon the hall door of Broadyards stood wide open, and the interior of the hall looked inviting and hospitable indeed. It was large, square, and massive, panelled in black oak, and adorned with rather a formidable array of armour and warlike weapons. A rich crimson Turkey carpet covered the floor, its soft pile deadening every foot. Privileged, of course, to enter unannounced, they passed in; the minister hung up his hat, and Helen approached the staircase.

"Annie will be in the nursery, likely. I suppose we shall find you, papa, in the library, when we come down?"

"Right, my dear," he replied, and Helen slowly ascended the stairs. Half-way up she met Bethune, Madame Douglas's maid, without whom she scarcely stirred a foot. She was a long, gaunt, elderly person, with a great deal of shrewd character in her face, and a remarkable absence of grace in her manners and speech.

"Good-afternoon, Bethune; I hope you are very well—and your mistress?"

"Yes, ma'am. Madam's lying down. The young mistress

is getting dressed. I heard nurse say she was going to the manse."

"Oh, then, she will be in her own room," said Helen, and, passing on, opened Annie's door without ceremony.

"I'm saved another flight of stairs for once, Annie," she said, with a smile. "Bethune told me you were here."

"Oh, there you are, Helen. Yes, I was coming over. Is papa here too?"

"Yes, downstairs," replied Helen, and sat down on a chair near the bed, rather dreading, if it must be told, the sharp scrutiny, and perhaps sharper speech, of her young sister.

Mrs. Douglas had on her bonnet; she now carefully took it off again in a most unusual silence, which Helen did not seek to break. Then she turned round, and, leaning her plump white hand on the dressing-table, looked her sister very seriously in the face. They presented quite a contrast to each other, being totally unlike in person as they were in personality. Helen was tall, slender, dignified; Annie short, round, and inclined to stoutness. Helen's face, though clear, was dark-skinned, and her hair nearly as black as the raven's wing; her sister had a sweet, round, baby face, a mass of curly fair hair, blue eyes, and a certain childish grace which had enchained the heart of the big laird of Broadyards, and bound him with silken cords. She was small, yet not insignificant; there was a good deal of character in her face when it came to be studied, and she was by no means undecided either in her opinions or her expression of the same, as Madam Douglas had very abundantly proved.

"Helen, you look quite beautiful to-day, but ever so sad. We had Brian here last night, and after he went away, Guy suggested a perfectly awful thing to me—that Dick had come to take you away. I could not sleep for quite an hour, thinking of it. By the bye, where *is* Dick? Is he downstairs with papa?"

"No; he has gone back to London, Annie, at three o'clock this afternoon."

"Oh!" The little lady pouted up her red lips, and gave

the pink ribbons at her wrist a little petulant twist. "Without as much as coming to *us* even? Well, I hope that will convince Guy of the absurdity of his imagination."

Helen's colour rose, and she slightly shook her head.

"Don't keep me in suspense, Helen," said Annie, quite sharply. "What *did* he come for, and why has he gone away so quickly? I hate mysteries—we never have any here."

"There is no mystery," replied Helen quietly, and even a trifle haughtily. "Richard came here to ask papa for me, and he had to return immediately to fulfil an imperative engagement."

"Helen, you do aggravate me. Are you going to marry him, or are you not?"

"I am."

"And papa has given his consent?"

"Yes."

Annie turned away then, and her eyes were smarting with tears of genuine disappointment. There was a moment's painful silence. "Let us go up and see baby, in case we behave badly to each other," said Mrs. Douglas at length, in quite an altered voice, which Helen keenly felt. "We have been so anxious about him, the darling; he had such a cough, and I was so angry with Madam for laughing at my anxiety, and with Brian for making light of it before me. It is really a dreadful thing to have a baby; it keeps one so very, very anxious, all the time."

"You fret needlessly, dear," said Helen, rising in relief. "Dear baby is really a very healthy child, and Brian is right not to encourage you to be morbid over him."

"Oh, you know nothing about it," said Annie, with the most superior air, and, opening her dressing-room door, she motioned Helen to pass out before her and go upstairs.

Helen went, nothing loth. In the presence of the baby the baby's mother was not likely to talk of much else. The rooms set apart for the heir befitted his lot in life, though they were spacious and handsome enough to have accommodated half a dozen of his kind.

The nurse, a capable, middle-aged person, selected after much deliberation and counsel, was busy with her sewing, and the baby slept soundly in his cot.

"He is asleep, I see, nurse. You can go down now and have tea. Miss Lockhart and I will stay by him," said the young mother, and she hung in an adoring attitude over the beautiful atom of humanity lying pink and plump among his delicate cambric and lace, making a pretty picture for any mother's eyes.

"Isn't he a darling, Helen? And isn't it wonderful that he should belong to Guy and me?" she said rapturously; then, quite suddenly, they being now quite alone, she laid her soft hand on her sister's shoulder and looked wistfully into her face.

"Oh, Helen! I had so set my heart on seeing you at Broadrule with a little baby of your own; and I am quite, quite certain, and so is Guy, that it will break poor Brian's heart."

"Don't be silly, Annie," said Helen, very harshly for her. "Everybody is sorry for Brian, except himself. He does *not* care for me in that way, and never did."

"Oh, Helen, how can you! Everybody has known it for years."

Helen turned impatiently away.

"I am going to marry Richard, Annie, and you must not talk to me in this way again: do you hear, Annie? never again. I cannot understand you all. To-day papa has spoken almost as if I wished to marry a quite undesirable person; and now you say nothing but Brian to me, when I might have looked for a word of sisterly sympathy. It is very hard indeed to bear."

Somehow Helen's tone and manner made her sister angry, and she drew back with a slightly offended look.

"Oh, very well, marry Richard, then! and go away to that great London, where nobody knows what will become of you. But I must say, I think you are standing in your own light. Where could you find another husband like Brian? and then you would be among all your own people, who adore you. Nothing will ever make up to you for that, as you will prove; and I am sorry for Brian."

"Will you be still, Annie?" cried Helen passionately. "You have no right to speak to me like that. Brian has never asked me, has never even hinted that he desired any such thing, and I am sure he would be as indignant as I if he could hear you."

Annie paused, half afraid. The awfulness of their demeanour towards each other suddenly struck her, and with a sob she clung to her sister's shoulder.

"Oh, forgive me, Helen dear! I don't mean to hurt you, but it is a disappointment, and I can't pretend it isn't. And I'll never more forgive Richard for it if I live to be a thousand —no, I never will!"

CHAPTER VI

"Blunt of manner, plain of speech,
Sharp the lessons she could teach."



LET'S go and sit down and talk things over," said Mrs. Douglas at length. "Everything seems easier when it is talked over."

She smoothed the baby's coverlet with a tender hand, and walked over to the window, Helen following her, and they sat a moment in silence. The prospect from the high windows of Broadyards was enchanting, giving as much variety of hill and wood and stream as the most fastidious eye could desire. Helen loved that prospect, every outstanding feature being a familiar landmark since those early days when a wise father had directed his young daughter's vision towards all the beauty with which a beneficent Creator has clothed the world.

"I wish I liked Richard better for your sake," began Annie plaintively. "I know he is fearfully clever, though I can't read his books, neither can Guy. But it is not so much cleverness one wants in a husband as goodness."

"I wish you would give me some reason for thinking that Richard will not make a good husband," said Helen stiffly.

"My dear Helen, I didn't say so, did I?—that he wouldn't make a good husband; only sometimes when he was a boy, you know, he was not kind to us, and he always wanted the best things for himself. But, of course, he will be different now he is a man, still"—She became quiet suddenly, conscious that she

was administering very cold comfort, and that her sister was resenting it keenly.

"I can't help saying, anyhow, that he oughtn't to have gone away to-day without coming to us. He had plenty of time before lunch; you and he could have walked over, and Guy could have driven him instead of papa. You can't say it was respectful to us, Helen, for it wasn't."

"I don't blame him, Annie, not in the least. He knows very well he is not much approved of here. I did not urge him to come. But he will be back soon, and then you shall see him."

"Back soon? I should just think he ought to. I expect he will be here a great many times before papa or we give our consent to his taking you away."

Helen slightly smiled.

"You are quite mistaken, Annie. He may be back once, but that will be all. I think we shall be married before Christmas."

"Helen Lockhart!"

"Don't excite yourself, Annie; there is no need."

"You are dreaming—positively dreaming, Helen, to say such a thing. Married before Christmas, and this the tenth of September! You don't know what you are saying. Nobody would ever consent to such a hurried affair. It would positively not be decent. I shall oppose it anyhow, and so will Guy."

"Papa has given his consent, and he is the only one I need to consider," Helen replied, with aggravating coolness.

At this young Mrs. Douglas became rather red, and her small temper rose. She had a great idea of her own importance and standing in the family, and to be thus contemptuously set aside was too much.

"You are not very polite to me to-day, Helen, and I can only attribute it to Richard's influence," she said, with great dignity. "As you have made all your arrangements without considering me, there is no more to say. But I hope you won't regret it. It can never be a good beginning to go entirely against the

wishes of one's family. I am very sorry to see you so completely under his influence, Helen; and I can't understand it."

"I am not under his influence, but there is no reason why we should wait; we are old enough to know our own minds. Besides, Richard wants to go abroad for the winter, and why should he go alone?"

"Abroad? Then, I suppose, you will not take a house just at first."

"Of course not."

"It is all of a piece, and I must say it is rather humiliating to have one's sister behave so badly. Why, what am I to say to people when they ask about your home? I shall have no address to give them. It does not sound in the least nice or respectable, and what Madam will say I tremble to think."

"Madam's opinion is absolutely no concern to me," said Helen, with a slight curl of the lips. "I have tried to like and respect her because she is Guy's mother, but she is an unkind, uncharitable old woman, who always thinks and says the worst."

This was very strong language, indeed, to fall from Helen's lips, who was always so guarded in her expressions of opinion, especially if unfavourable.

"Now you are showing more and more the influence of Richard," said her sister; "and I have one piece of advice to give you, Helen, to which I think I am entitled, as I have had a great deal more experience than you. It is this: don't begin your married life by setting your husband on a pinnacle and falling down to worship him. Men have many faults, and they always think a great deal of themselves. Even Guy, who is so good, is not free from conceit; but that is his mother's fault. You see, so many idols are clay, and it is always humiliating to have to bring one's worship to an abrupt end. It is far better to be sensible from the beginning."

"You are very wise to-day, Annie," said Helen, with a sly smile.

At this Mrs. Douglas jumped to her feet.

"We had better go downstairs, I think, for we are going to

quarrel. I feel it in the air. Will you stay tea? Madam will be down, of course—if, indeed, she has not ferreted out papa already. She seems to know by instinct when he is in the house.”

She was quite correct. Madam had hardly lain down when she heard Helen speak to her maid on the stair. She had immediately rung the bell, and, having ascertained that the minister was downstairs, had risen at once. The minister had just comfortably settled himself with the current *Fortnightly*, when the door opened and Madam appeared. She was a very stately, fine woman, preserving her erectness of figure at sixty, her keen black eyes requiring no spectacles, and her mental powers as sharp as a needle. She was handsomely dressed, always in rich black silk, with a little cap of real lace resting on her iron-grey hair, and a collar of the same around her neck. She also always wore an old-fashioned silver chatelaine, which seemed to be part of herself. She was very Scotch, and prided herself upon it; using many out-of-the-way words, indeed, which she had often to explain to her listeners. A gentlewoman of the rigid old stock, sharp of tongue, and a trifle intolerant by nature, but good-hearted, and as loyal a friend as one could wish to possess.

“I heard you’d come, so I got up, Mr. Lockhart,” she said, as she offered him her slender hand, which sparkled with many valuable rings. “Helen’s here? I suppose the twasome are haverin’ over the bairn up the stair.”

“I think they’ll have something else to haver over to-day, Madam,” said the minister, with his genial smile. “I’ve a bit news for you, but perhaps you can guess it.”

The minister purposely lost no time in communicating the matter to Madam, being anxious that her plain speaking should be over before Helen came down.

“Ay, what’s that? Are the heritors agreed at last that the manse wants something done, eh?”

“Oh, I don’t think so; at least, I have heard nothing of that. It is a family matter this time. I was asked last night to part with Helen.”

Madam sagaciously nodded, and a smile, which made her somewhat harsh face for the moment beautiful, dawned on her long, thin lips.

"It's but a step to Broadrule, Mr. Lockhart. Few faithers hae their bairns so near. It wad be an easy question to answer."

A shade crossed the minister's face, and he did not immediately speak. Madam looked at him in surprise.

"You have made a mistake, Madam. I only wish you had guessed right," he said quickly. "It is Woodgate, not Brian, who is to take away Helen."

"Woodgate?"

Madam, with one of her rather sudden gestures, leaped from her chair, and her chatelaine made a great jingling.

"A bonnie impidence he had to seek Helen Lockhart. Let him wale a wife among his ain kind. I hope you didna spare him, sir."

"We've all made a mistake, Madam, and the only thing we can do now is to hold our peace. Helen is going to marry Woodgate almost immediately."

Madam stared at him; positively stared, paralysed into silence.

"My certy, ye're no wise, Edward Lockhart, sittin' there sayin' sic a thing. Oh, ye're haverin'. Helen wad never look at a puir, jimpy, empty thing like that."

The minister silently laughed. In such estimation, then, was the name honoured in the world of letters held in the Dale. Truly, it is true that a prophet hath but small honour in his own country.

"You're hard on him, Madam; but we must give him his due, though he does rob us of what we prize. Richard has fine parts, and I'm very hopeful of him; and if he is a trifle effeminate, Helen will make a man of him."

Madam took a slow turn across the room, her silk gown sweeping majestically behind her, and her head held rather high in the air. Only her respect for the minister kept back the torrent of her righteous wrath.

"Weel, I hope ye dinna expect my congratulations, Mr. Lockhart, for ye'll no' get them. Bless me, where are Helen's een? Brian Laidlaw's a braw man, more worth a woman's while; but Dickie Woodgate! An' what do you mean by givin' your consent to sic a marriage? tell me that."

She spoke with extraordinary acidity, but the minister knew her well, and did not mind it.

"I could not refuse it. Helen has a right to please herself, and I have nothing to bring against Woodgate's moral character."

"He writes books. That wad be enough for me if he'd sought *my* dochter. Did ye ever hear o' a man that writes books bein' fit to be man to any woman? Look at Tom Carlyle. I kent Jeanie Welsh when she was a braw Haddington lass, an' I saw her last year in London—wae's me, sic a change! She marriet for ambition, an' a bonnie potch she's made it. Let me write to Mrs. Carlyle to send a warnin' to Helen. She's been through it. She kens what it is to live wi' a thrawn deil that writes books, and that thinks the warld was made for him to write his books in—books his ain mither canna read."

The minister, in spite of his inward soreness of heart, went off into a fit of silent laughter, which rather aggravated the old lady. She regarded it as no laughing matter.

"Oh, weel, if ye are sae little concerned, far be it frae me to tak' up my heid about Helen," she said sourly. "I'm an auld woman, an' I've seen a heap; and if Helen Lockhart takes a licht heart out of the Dale, she'll bring back a heavy one. You tak' my word for it, Dickie Woodgate's one o' the men that shouldna marry. Eh, sirs, my puir Helen!"

This, of course, was extremely painful for Mr. Lockhart to hear, and he felt that he must put a stop to it.

"Well, Madam, you are entitled to your own opinion, of course, and I know you think little of Richard; but may I ask you to be a little more guarded in your speech to Helen? Such talk cannot do any good, and may do a great deal of harm."

Madam stood by the table, her white, jewel-laden, and still

beautiful hand resting upon it lightly, and thus surveyed the minister with a certain air of serious concern, as if she doubted that he was not quite right in his mind.

"What's cairriet you awa', Mr. Lockhart? I'm sure, if it's Richard's ain speech, it's naething but foolishness. He hasna even respect for age. An' has he onything to keep Helen on? Will she get her meat?"

"Ah, Madam, you are reducing the thing to absurdity. I told you long ago Richard had an income from property left by his father, and he makes well by his literary work, I believe, though I did not ask. *That* occasions me no anxiety at all."

In spite of himself, his inmost concern was betrayed in the last sentence. Madam caught at it triumphantly.

"Eh, my man, ye're nae better pleased than you should be," she said quickly. "Ye are o' my way o' thinkin', if ye wad own it. Your heart's no' at rest about the thing. Wairn Helen or it be ower late."

"It is too late, Madam. I will be so far frank with you, because I know you to be a true friend to me and mine. If I could, I would keep Helen nearer home; but things in this world do not always go as we would like them."

At that moment the girls' voices sounded in the corridor, and they entered presently, some tokens of their disturbing talk being visible in their faces. There was a certain air of defiance about the usually placid Helen which might have warned Madam not to broach the subject. But the sight of Helen in all her winsomeness, Helen whom she so dearly loved, and was wont to hold up as an example everywhere, roused her indignation, and she held out her hand stiffly.

"Good-afternoon, Helen. I hope I see you well."

"Tea is in the drawing-room, papa," said Annie nervously, dreading an encounter between her mother-in-law and her sister in her present mood. "Let us go in. I am so sorry Guy has gone to a sale at Hallkirk, and will not be home till six."

The minister rose, a trifle nervously. He saw from Helen's

face that things had not gone smoothly upstairs, and that she was in a highly strung condition of mind. But for the fact that he felt tired and fagged himself, and ready for his early cup of tea, he would have hurried Helen away at once. He glanced imploringly at Madam, but she preserved her stiff demeanour, and sailed out of the room like a duchess.

Altogether, that little family party, who had so often met under happy circumstances, united in loving interests, found themselves in an entirely new attitude towards each other. Madam preserved a rigid silence, and wore her most forbidding aspect. The minister had in a manner bound her to silence, but there is a silence a great deal more disturbing and expressive than mere speech. Helen was unhappy, and answered at random the few commonplace remarks which accompanied the tea-drinking. It was a miserable farce, and all were glad when it was over.

"We had better go now, papa. Perhaps you will come over soon with baby, Annie? It is nearly a week since you were at the manse."

"I'll come to-morrow, perhaps, if it is fine, and baby has no cough."

"Very well." Helen nodded, and then went up to Madam.

"Good-bye, Madam," she said. "Perhaps you may come with Annie too? We have not seen you this long time at the manse."

"I'll not promise," said Madam stiffly; then, as she felt the grip of Helen's hand, she looked straight into the girl's eyes, and one large bright drop rolled from under her eyelid down her cheek. "Eh, my woman, ye're makin' mony a sair heart in the Dale; but gang awa', gang awa'. The minister's glowerin' at me, an' I daurna speak. Gang awa'."

Helen turned away with a spasm contracting her face, and immediately she was without the door burst into tears.

CHAPTER VII

“Farewell,
Lest of mine eyes thou shouldst have less to tell
Than now thou hast.”

ELEN began to prepare at once for her wedding, feeling relieved that the engagement was to be short. When the news spread, there was not in the parish that buzz of happy excitement so great an event as Miss Lockhart's marriage might have been expected to create. The parish, like certain private individuals elected to be disappointed. It had long ago settled the ultimate destiny of the minister's daughter, and felt aggrieved to find itself so completely at fault. Perhaps the parish was not intellectual nor ambitious, perhaps it had but a narrow and bigoted vision, but it was sincere and loving in its desire to keep Helen Lockhart in her old home. As was natural, perhaps, it proceeded to glorify plain Brian Laidlaw into a hero. He found himself, to his own great astonishment and disgust, the recipient of a great deal of kindly and sympathetic attention, which he did not want, but resented savagely. During the last quarter of that eventful year Brian was guilty of more acts of wilful discourtesy than he had perpetrated during the whole course of his life. Old ladies who had made an idol of the brave young doctor even asked themselves and each other at their tea-drinkings whether they had not made a mistake in his character all along. Little cared Brian. The only sympathy he brooked, and which

did him any good, was that of honest Guy Douglas; a sympathy none the less genuine and substantial that it never said anything at all. But Brian felt it in the glance of his friend's fearless eye—in the grip of his hand; and once he so far unburdened his mind to Guy in a manner which made that honest man look at him in simple wonder. Guy was a thoroughly good fellow, but he could not conceive of a love which had in it so little alloy of self. It was of Helen he spoke, entirely of Helen, betraying in his very manner and look the intensity of his concern lest she in her married life should not be so tenderly cherished as she deserved. It filled Broadyards with such a flood of passionate regret that he could not hold his tongue.

"Brian, Helen is mad! If only she knew what she is throwing away. I could go down on my knees to her if it would do any good. Heavens! why are women, the best of them, such born idiots? They think if a man can write quires of infernal rubbish to them, can cram them with poetry, and such rot, they're going to live in paradise for ever, when, like as not, they'll find themselves in the other place."

"Gently, old boy, gently," said Brian.

"Well, it's true. You must let me speak this once, Brian. I'll choke if it's bunged up any longer. You and I know Woodgate of old; we haven't been boys together for nothing. We know the fellow's other side. Helen doesn't, and we can't be brutes enough to tell her, even if there was any chance of her taking it in."

"Whisht, Guy! you and I had better let Woodgate a-be. He is faring badly enough in the Dale just now! don't let us throw any more stones at him, but hope for the best. Only I have made up my mind to this," he added, and his face flushed, while his strong right hand involuntarily clenched. "If he is bad to Helen he shall answer for it to me, only—it is not possible. She must make a good man of him, even if he were a bad one, which it would be unjust to call him."

"Oh, I grant that! Nobody has ever said he was a fast liver or anything of that kind. He's just what my mother

says, fushionless ; but perhaps he may suit Helen better than we think. I confess I don't understand her, and when it comes to the bit, I'd rather have a woman that speaks her mind, like my wife,—you know where you are with her,—and if she clouts your lugs, you know what it's for. But I say, Brian, you won't wear the willow for one woman. There's other lasses in the Dale besides Helen Lockhart."

Brian shook his head.

"Not for me. I've never wanted anybody but Helen, and now I've lost her, I'll do without."

And Guy felt it was a hopeless case, and his soreness of heart against his sister-in-law increased. They never spoke of the matter again ; and the days went by : ruddy October, with its drops of blood in every hedgerow, gave place to chill November, with its dismal rains and sodden skies ; then December leaped merrily upon the Dale with a sharp snow-storm and a snap of frost, which turned the dreary earth into a thing of bridal beauty. During all these weeks two things were observed by those who were keeping eyes and ears open for everything concerning the inmates of Broadrule manse. One was, that Brian Laidlaw had entirely discontinued his visits ; the other, that the bridegroom-elect had never come back. Letters in plenty he wrote to Helen, always with a plausible excuse ; and finally she knew that she need not expect him till some days before the twenty-first of December, their wedding-day. Somehow, in spite of her personal desire for his presence, it was something of a relief that he did not come. She knew that he would resent the cold congratulation with which he would be received ; and she had some ground, it will be admitted, for thinking her relatives rather aggressive in their selfish disappointment. She also felt Brian's absence and marked avoidance very keenly, for she loved him dearly, but she never spoke his name. She went about her household duties perhaps more silently than of yore, performing each with a lingering and tender care, because so soon she and they must know each other no more. She was one of those women to whom home and all its obligations are essentially dear. No

department of household care was ever irksome to her, and the little attentions she had lavished on the father she adored had been the wine of her life. She was born to minister; take from her that heritage of womanhood, and her occupation was gone. She believed that in her new sphere that special faculty would have fullest scope; meanwhile, she keenly felt for the old man who would miss all that she, and she alone, could give him. For his absolute physical comfort she was not concerned; the maids were tried and trustworthy, bound to the service of the house by many ties; but she knew that she would be missed at every turn. It made her very tender, very considerate, very watchful in these latter days, and it wrung her heart to see in him a restlessness and irritability he had never before exhibited. She knew that the shadow of the parting lay heavy on his soul.

She was much sustained by Woodgate's letters, which were certainly calculated to fill the heart of any woman with the happiest anticipation of the future. They were masterpieces in their way, wise, witty, and serious by turns, and conveying to her always—by delicate hint rather than direct allusion—his surpassing need of her presence. Resigning herself to the inevitable at last, Mrs. Gavin Douglas proceeded to do her duty to her family, and issued invitations for a dinner-party in honour of the event. At this great function it was desirable, of course, that Richard should be present, and it was fixed for the twentieth, the night before the wedding. Woodgate wrote that he would be detained in London by press of work until the nineteenth, and could therefore not accept for an earlier date. He was to arrive early on the evening of the nineteenth; everything was ready for the wedding, there would be no hurry or confusion at the end; even Helen's trunks, containing all but her gown, were packed, and she was quite ready for her lover when he should come. On that afternoon, a Tuesday, she went out of doors alone, with the unacknowledged desire to take farewell of familiar scenes, and the conviction that she should not look upon them again for a long time. She took a long walk. It was a choice winter day, clear, crisp, and bracing, the frosty ground making pleasant footing, and the

snow lying in all the clefts of the hills lending variety to the wintry scene. The dead heather, bearing no promise of the glory it would give to the world in another year, made a soft carpet for her feet as she skirted the lower slopes of Ruberslaw, pausing often as she walked to note with her keen and loving eye each familiar and dear detail. A flaming shaft from the fiery sunset fell athwart the rugged face of Minto, setting all the sombre pines aglow, and far across the bare expanse she could catch a glimpse of the twin breasts of the Eildons, standing out round and shapely against the transparency of the sky. When her eyes, from roaming over that winter prospect, rested themselves at length on the grey spire of Broadrule church and the white gables of the manse, a little sob choked her, and she was fain to dry from her eyes the unwonted tears. Many fair scenes she might yet see, but none fairer or more dear than that which her eyes had looked upon for six-and-twenty years.

The intense frost, which the brilliant sun had scarcely mellowed, made it possible for her to walk straight as the crow flies across field and wood; and as she knew where to find all the stepping-stones in the burns, there was no obstacle in her way. She was standing poised upon one of these natural bridges which span the noisy little Rule, dreamily watching its limpid flow, when the click of hoofs on the bridle-path above made her look suddenly up.

"Oh, is it you, Brian?"

She lifted her feet daintily, stepped back to the bank, which she climbed, Brian leaning from his saddle to give her a helping hand. But he never spoke.

"Won't you speak to me, Brian?" she asked, with a touch of wistfulness; but he only swung himself from his saddle and walked silently by her side.

"What are you doing here?" he asked abruptly.

"Enjoying my walk, and saying good-bye to familiar things," she said simply; "at least for a time."

She felt the tension of the moment even more keenly than he, but, womanlike, strove to hide it.

"Surely you are very busy just now ; nobody ever sees you. Where have you been to-day ?"

"Oh, pottering about ; there isn't much doing."

"Then you did not speak truly to Annie when you refused her invitation for to-night ?" said Helen quickly. "We all feel your refusal, Brian, very much. I most of all."

"I can't help that. I had to say something to Mrs. Douglas ; but she knows the reason I won't come, just as you know why I'm not coming on Thursday."

"Then you really are not coming, Brian ?"

"No ; I have something to do, five miles beyond Branksome, on Thursday. It'll take me all day."

Helen turned her face away, and her firm mouth trembled. Brian did not look at her. He knew she was vexed, and he was glad of it, because he was suffering so acutely himself.

"We'll not see you in the Dale, then, Helen, for a long time," he said presently, switching the withered reeds with his crop ; "and you'll soon forget all about us."

"Do you think so ?" Helen asked simply.

"But the worst of it for us poor devils is, that we shan't be able to forget you."

He stole a glance at her averted face, but could not catch its expression, and so went on probing her sore heart more deeply still.

"No, that's the worst of it—we shan't be able to forget you—and I question if you'll ever get anybody to think more of you, or do half as much for you, as the honest folk in the Dale. They haven't got gigantic intellects, maybe, but their hearts are in the right place. There's nothing but weeping and wailing, the length and breadth of the parish, to-day, over Miss Helen's departure. It's a grand thing to be bonnie and weel liket."

"I think you are cruel, Brian, very cruel," cried Helen passionately ; "and you have no right to say such horrible things to me. What have I done to deserve them ? Tell me that."

Then Brian's self-control flew to the four winds of heaven. He let Bob's bridle slip through his fingers and grasped Helen's shoulder.

"Why do I say such horrible things to you?" he echoed, his voice hoarse with passion. "Because I'm suffering more than I'm fit to bear. Helen, I love you as my own soul, always have done, and I thought, God help me! that you cared a little for me; and now I have to stand by and see you married to another man, less worthy—Heaven forgive my pride—than I. Is that nothing? And yet you expect me to smile, and say sweet words to you, and lisp my congratulations, like other hypocrites. But I can't, and I won't."

Helen pulled her shoulder from his grip; her face was pale, and blue about the lips, her eyes full of a vague misery. She shivered as if with cold as she drew herself away.

"Forgive me, Helen. I'm beside myself with misery, and I don't know what I'm saying. How could you expect me to make a guest at the wedding which is the deathblow to every hope of my life? and"—

Helen wheeled round suddenly and faced him, and a most unusual wrath was visible on her face.

"Brian," she said, and her voice trembled, clear, incisive, and cold in the still air, "you have said a great deal to-day, and it is all in the same tone, reproaching me for something of which I am entirely innocent. I have suffered a great deal from many people on your account during the last two months, and I will speak to-day because I have something to say. You say you have always cared for me in that way. If it is true, I have only one question to ask. Why did you conceal it from me so long?"

Brian looked at her bewildered, unable to utter a word. This was an entirely new rendering of the case, and a sudden light glowed in his face.

"Would it have made any difference, Helen?"

"I say nothing at all about that," she replied, quite coldly. "What I do say is, that I ought not to be blamed for not seeing what was never shown to me."

"Bless my heart, Helen, I've always loved you! I thought you knew it all along."

Helen shook her head.

"There is no use saying any more about it, Brian; only I had to defend myself, and I think the least we can do now is to part friends."

She offered him her hand, but he did not take it. He was struck blind and dumb at his own stupidity, and regarded Helen with such a mournful steadfastness that she felt she must either laugh or cry. Finally, she said "Good-bye," and walked away; nor did he seek to detain or follow her. Looking back when she had crossed Rule Water, she saw him still standing with his arm across Bob's neck, and his eyes fixed on the ground. And that picture, the solitary figures of horse and rider standing out against the clear, sharp air, remained in her mind for a very long time.

As for Brian, he deserved pity, and Helen's candour had by no means mended matters, so far as his peace of mind was concerned.

CHAPTER VIII

"All loved her, yet there mingled with that love
A certain sad impatience."

HEN Helen reached home, her father had already gone off to Halkirk to meet Richard. She felt glad to be alone in the house for a little, having been somewhat disturbed by the occurrence of the afternoon. She could have wished, indeed, that Brian had less power to disturb her, but tried to convince herself that it was because he was so old a friend that she felt his estrangement so much. She felt no excitement at the prospect of seeing Richard, and when she heard the roll of the returning carriage-wheels in the avenue, she went out to the door. She had not changed her attire, as they were to drive out, but still wore the becoming gown of brown homespun in which she had walked out. She coloured up, however, when she saw him alight, a tall figure wearing a fur-lined and trimmed travelling coat, which seemed to give both height and breadth to his somewhat slender figure. He threw his arm round her and drew her indoors to the nearest room.

"My darling, at last!" he said, with a very real fervour; and, holding back her fair face from him, looked into it earnestly, and kissed it many times. She had never doubted him for a moment, believing implicitly everything he had told her concerning the press of work which kept him till the last moment

in London. She was absolutely truthful herself, and never doubted others unless she had absolute proof.

"You are looking well, Helen, very well indeed," he said, with a solicitude she felt to be very sweet. "So it has come at last; two days more and we shall be together. Tell me you are happy at the prospect."

He did not for a moment doubt it, but wanted the assurance from her lips.

"I am not unhappy, you can guess, Richard," she said, her beautiful eyes aglow; "but you—are you sure you will never regret it?"

"Yes, I shall, if you do not have more faith in me," he made haste to answer gaily. "Well, dearest, I have got everything properly wound up. All my work is over, and we shall have nothing to do but enjoy ourselves. We shall make straight for Florence, and not come back to England till we can return to summer skies."

Helen smiled. The prospect was fair. She had the natural desire of an intelligent and inquiring mind to see the beauties of other lands. It seemed to her at that moment that the new life offered much to compensate for anything she might give up in the old.

"And what about this dreadful function to-night?" he said, presently, as he took off his overcoat. "How many are coming to regard us with curiosity, and me with suspicion, all set down under the category of a friendly interest?"

Helen laughed, but shook her finger at him. "Now, Richard, that is too bad, and you must promise not to be sarcastic to-night, but appear in your most amiable mood. It is not a large party—only a dozen in all."

"A dozen?—name them; or don't—I daresay I can make a guess. And how is the good Brian? Has he put a decent face on his disappointment, eh?"

Helen coloured, remembering the occurrence of the afternoon.

"We had better go down to tea now, Richard. It is six, and we have to be at Broadyards at half-past seven."

"Oh, I shall be ready. I say, Helen, look here,"

He took a little morocco case from his pocket, touched the spring, and showed her a diamond star lying in its vivid and startling beauty on its bed of white velvet.

"You must wear that to-night; it is my wedding gift. What kind of a gown have you?"

"Velvet; the old velvet one you used to admire," she said shyly. "I must not put on any of my new ones, you know, till after to-morrow. It would not be lucky."

"Oh, well, I know the gown; this will go well with it. I wish it was all over, Helen, and we were away from those northern latitudes; they don't suit me at all."

At that moment, the minister, wearying for his tea, gave the bell a little impatient tingle, which made Helen laugh and run. The little impromptu meal was a merry one; the bridegroom seemed in a happy mood, and his manner towards the minister had just the right commingling of deference and affectionate regard. Helen was quiet but happy too; the father's heart, never quite at rest all these weeks, became more reassured, telling himself that love for a pure, sweet woman like Helen had mellowed all Woodgate's faults away. They lingered so long talking over the arrangements for the morrow that they had scarcely time to dress, and were the last guests to arrive at Broadyards. Helen looked well, strikingly handsome indeed, in her plain, elegant gown of rich brown velvet, with its touch of real valuable lace to relieve it, and the diamond star making a thousand dazzling points of light on her white stately breast.

Mrs. Douglas came forward to receive them, a dainty vision in blue silk and white lace, and she managed to throw into her manner just the right amount of cordiality, wishing to show Woodgate that he was tolerated rather than welcomed as a future member of the family. While politely replying to the little lady's greetings, Richard managed to take in the occupants of the room, recognising most of the people he expected to see, but disappointed in one. Brian was absent. Broadyards, still sore about Brian, was a trifle stiff in his manner, but spoke out bluntly as was his wont.

"How are you, Dick? We can hardly say we're as glad to see you as we might be if you hadn't come to take away Helen."

"And you've brought all these people here to tell me the same thing, I suppose; that's real Dale hospitality," he answered, with a laugh, noticing at the same time that Helen had taken her seat by old Doctor Laidlaw's side, and that he was paying her special attention. Old Madam, a fine striking-looking figure in the richest of silk and most priceless of lace, and wearing such of the Douglas diamonds as had not passed to her son's wife, never suffered her eyes to light on Woodgate, and it amused him very much. He promised himself a little passage at arms with her before the evening was over. It was a goodly company—the best friends of both families in the Dale, all substantial gentlefolks, without pretension or display; but Woodgate regarded them all with a species of good-natured contempt. He was not of them; and, though he had sojourned for years in their midst, had never become as one of themselves. They had regarded him always, and did regard him now, as an alien, and, without exception, resented his marriage with Helen. In these circumstances the giving of a dinner to honour the occasion was an absurd mistake, and instead of improving matters, was calculated rather to widen the breach. For Woodgate was not in the least conciliatory. Helen went to dinner on her brother-in-law's arm, Woodgate taking Annie. It was on the whole a pretty sociable meal, and passed off well till the toast of the evening came to be honoured, the proposal falling to the lot of old Doctor Laidlaw, as the oldest friend of both families. The old man, in spite of a natural brusqueness of manner, had plenty of tact, and could make a graceful after-dinner speech. He did not say much, but managed to convey the opinion of every one present that Woodgate might consider himself a very lucky man indeed.

When he rose to reply, his cheeks were a trifle flushed, and there was a rather mischievous gleam in his eye.

"My friends," he said, in that sweet, suave voice of his, "I thank you from my heart for the heartiness with which you have honoured this toast. The manner in which it has

been proposed by my old friend considerably simplifies my reply. He considers me a lucky man, and my opinion entirely coincides with his. One thing I am certain of, and that is, that whatever the future may be, Helen Lockhart will never forget the Dale and her old associations, nor shall I; and we hope that our marriage will make a bond between the great city and this which nothing but death will break."

It was gracefully done, and touched some of the impressionable ladies to tears. But Madam, when her daughter-in-law gave the signal, bustled out of the room with a great deal of unnecessary rustling, which might be taken as an expression of her disapproval.

"I canna bide the man, my dear," she said to Mrs. Kilpatrick of Cavering, as she took her arm upstairs. "An' there was a lump in Doctor Laidlaw's throat when he was speakin'. What for is Brian no' here the nicht? It's queer a' through, I tell ye, an' it'il be queerer afore it's dune."

As was the custom in those parts, the gentlemen made a long sojourn in the dining-room, and when they did begin to saunter upstairs, the ladies had their tea and the most of their gossip past. Mrs. Douglas was at the piano when they entered, Helen seeking a song to sing. Woodgate, whom the generous wine had rendered more amiable, made straight for Madam, where she sat in majesty, with her stiff skirts spread out on the ottoman, and her slender fingers playing with her double eyeglass.

"Hulloa!" she said brusquely; "you an' me are not that sib, Richard Woodgate. There's your place the nicht," she added, pointing with her fan to the piano.

Woodgate smiled, deliberately swept her ample skirts aside, and sat down.

"By and by, Madam; I bear in mind that opportunities for talking to you will soon be few; besides, I want to ask you something. What have I done to mortally offend you? I have been puzzling myself over it all the evening. You know you are an apostle of candour, so don't evade my question."

"Oh, I winna, my man, sin' ye've speer't," she replied in

her very broadest. "Are there nae women across the Border, that ye maun needs tak' awa' the flower o' our flock?"

"Women in plenty, but none like Helen," he answered, sincerely enough.

Madam put on her eyeglass, and deliberately surveyed him with all the keenness of which she was capable.

"I hae never liked ye, Richard, as callant or man," she said. "An' maybe I have done ye wrang. It's Helen's sel' you're seekin', surely, and ye'll dae what a man can to mak' her a contented wife?"

"For what reason would I seek her, Madam? She has no money, that I am aware, even if I required money in a wife. You do me an injustice, Madam; and not you alone, but everybody else in this enlightened place. You are selfish here in the Dale, grossly selfish, seeking to keep every good thing to yourselves."

Madam smiled slightly, and continued to regard him steadfastly, only partially reassured.

"I'm but an auld wife, Richard, and you are a great man, so they say. Mind ye this, lad: a woman canna live on book-writin', or the clatter o' folk praisin' her man. Happen ye to ken in London Mrs. Carlyle, Jane Welsh that was?"

"I have never met her. Of course I know to whom you refer," replied Woodgate, not without interest.

"Weel, see ye to it that her fate be na Helen's. Ye may never be as great as Carlyle, but I'm thinkin' ye might hae his faults, which arise out o' naething but an inordinate vanity. The crater thinks the Almichty made the universe for him, an' nae ither body. Dinna ye forget that Helen has a corner in that universe set apart for her just as ye have, an' maybe the Lord 'll hae a sicht mair interest in her bit than yours. That's my advice to you, Richard, the nicht afore the marriage. Helen Lockhart's nae common woman; she has a heart of gold, but there's depths there can seethe in a righteous anger. She'll no' be sae saft where wrang is. See you that ye dinna set that sea in commotion. Ye'll never rue it but aince, and that'll be aye."

There was a certain weird poetry in the old lady's style of talk which took the edge off her entirely uncomplimentary tone, and tempted Richard to carry her on. He was always interested in characters, just as Laidlaw pricked up his ears for cases.

"So you know Mrs. Carlyle? There may be faults on both sides, Madam; you will admit that."

"I will; and the woman's soured, soured oot o' a' her lassie sweetness as any woman in the flesh might be, leevin' wi' sic a thrawn deil o' a man. It wad break the temper o' the angel Gabriel; an' Helen has a temper, mind, as she should hae, just enough o' the deil to keep him oot. But gae 'wa': she's goin' to sing, an' she'll gar me greet likely, an' an auld wife's tears are nae sicht for you; so gang an' stand by her as ye should."

Woodgate did as he was bid. Helen sang well, without affectation or the slightest self-consciousness. Her voice, very sweet and clear and true, had been carefully trained and conscientiously exercised, so that it conferred rare pleasure on all who heard it. She felt keenly the effort it was to go through with the ballad for which they had asked her, "The Auld Hoose"; but, exercising her rare self-control, she did not suffer her emotion to betray itself in her voice, and was the most composed of all present. After the song, somehow, conversation did not flow so easily as before, and, as was the custom among these simple country folks, the party broke up early.

Woodgate remained overnight at Broadyards, and thought it worth his while to make himself particularly agreeable to Guy, as they smoked a late pipe together over the gunroom fire. Guy, woke up his wife, when he went upstairs at two A.M., to inform her that Woodgate wasn't half a bad fellow after all, and they had been jumping on him too much.

Next day, soon after breakfast, Brian Laidlaw set out on Bob's back for a remote glen miles beyond Branksome Dene, and his father saw him no more till the darkening, after the festivities of the day were over.

"Ye didna miss much, lad," was the old man's sole comment on the affair. "It was just as Madam said as we came down the stairs, 'It's as dreich as a Liddesdale drow.'"

CHAPTER IX

"A cloud no bigger than a man's hand."

HONEYMOON trips, as a rule, are devoid of interest to all save those immediately concerned in them; nobody wants a minute account of the wanderings of a newly-married pair. Nevertheless, it is necessary for us to follow Woodgate and Helen to Florence, which was their first stopping-place, and which was a revelation of beauty and of wonder to Helen, who had seen but little beyond her native vale. She was well-read and intelligent; her lively and always correct appreciation of what was genuinely beautiful and artistic was in some measure a surprise to her husband, who enjoyed seeing the city with which he was so familiar through her eyes.

They took up their abode in one of the best hotels in the Lung'Arno, and there had their own rooms, dining sometimes, for their amusement, at the table d'hôte, but mostly in their own dining-room, which was on the second floor, with two windows to the river commanding a view of the lovely San Miniato and the ever-beautiful hills of Fiesole. Sometimes it grated on Helen's sense of fitness to hear the jingle of the car-bells and the laughter of the evening crowds on the boulevards; it seemed to her that a city sacredly environed with so many priceless associations should be preserved from every modern element; an idea at which Woodgate laughed consumedly. He was intensely cosmopolitan, and a

lover of his kind, happier among crowds than in solitude, preferring a crowded theatre of an evening to a stroll by moonlight—things which puzzled Helen not a little. She could not understand how one who wrote so appreciatively of nature in her every mood, pensive, grave, and gay, should care so little to commune with her in quiet. The close companionship of these early days of married life showed Woodgate to Helen in a new light, and she was forced to admit very soon that he did not live in the exalted atmosphere she had once imagined, but was the most ordinary of mortals, whose conversation was always on a very mediocre plane, and who kept such fine ideas as he evidently had for use in his literary work alone. She was somewhat surprised, but had nothing to complain of, since of all companions he was the most entertaining, gay, good-natured, debonair always; and so a month was wiled away with scarcely a serious thought. By the end of that time Woodgate began to exhibit signs of ennui; he was by nature restless, fond of change, and always on the wing.

"Let's go on, Helen," he said one night, as they lingered over their dessert by the open window of their dining-room. "Don't you remember, we agreed that we should never remain long enough in one place to grow sick of it?"

"I don't remember that; but it is all right, Richard. I am ready to go with you when you wish."

"I have never stayed a month in a foreign city, except Paris, in my life, so you may congratulate yourself that you have made it new for me, dearest," he said in his light, fond way. "Where would you like to go next?"

"Not home, Richard—back to London, I mean, to seek for a house?" she suggested, with a faint touch of wistfulness not lost upon him.

"Already, Helen: Why, my love, our wanderings are only beginning. If London sees us at the beginning of summer, we shall do well."

Helen looked just a trifle dismayed. She was housewifely by nature, a woman to whose happiness home and all its attributes were essential.

"Summer, Richard? And shall you—we, I mean—be idle all that time?"

"I shall not bind myself—you can please your sweet self," said Woodgate, as he filled up her glass. "Well, could you be ready for flight to-morrow?"

That was his way when an idea came to him, especially if it involved a change of any kind; he was in a fever to carry it out.

"I daresay I could; but hadn't we planned to go to Ferrara to-morrow?"

"Oh, Ferrara can wait till we come back. Whether shall it be Venice or Rome to-morrow? Helen, it is a study to see the shadow gathering in your eyes, and I can put into words what you are thinking, that I shall make you into a vagabond like myself."

"I ought to be pleased to follow you in everything, Richard," she replied, with a smile.

"You ought, but you won't be. You will assert yourself one day, I am sure; but this is *my* holiday, Helen, my first real one for years, and you won't spoil it for me, I am sure."

"Indeed I will not," she replied, with earnestness. "And you know what a thing it is for me to see so much under your guidance. Only remember that I have grown all my life in one place, like a tree on Teviot banks, and it will take a little time to unloose the tendrils and accustom them to strange soil. There, have I not grown quite poetical? When will it be time to go to London? I have heard you say it is beautiful in early summer."

"So it is, but we shall not go back till our souls are sick for English soil, then our home will give us contentment. That is the wisdom of life, Helen, to sip its sweets, and never drink too deep to satiate. Well, Andrea, what now?"

The noiseless waiter glided into the room bearing a silver salver in his hand. "A letter for the signor."

Woodgate took it, left a lire in its place, and with a lively expression of interest amounting to consciousness broke the seal. Helen had no thought of watching him. She was entirely unsuspecting, and while he read it she leaned back in

her chair and watched the first faint beams of the rising moon, creeping over the city and falling tenderly on the rushing waters of the turbid stream. There was something in the fierce and rapid flow of the Arno which fascinated Helen, it was so out of keeping with the old-world repose of old Florence, and yet so suggestive of the past strife and turmoil which had made its history. She was called back from a reverie by her husband's voice, and it struck her that it sounded differently, she could not tell why.

"How odd this should come to-night! It is a letter from an old and dear friend of mine who is at present at Genoa, but coming here to-morrow."

"Oh, then we need not leave Florence to-morrow," cried Helen, with interest. "You will wait to see him, of course."

"Yes, I should like to wait; it would be uncourteous otherwise. But my friend happens to be a lady this time, not a gentleman."

"A lady!"

Helen looked surprised, and just glanced at the large square envelope in her husband's hand—a suggestive glance, which, however, Woodgate ignored, though quite conscious of it.

"A lady," he continued impressively and deliberately, "whom it will be both a pleasure and a privilege for you to meet."

"Tell me about her," said Helen, simply as a child, leaning her arms, bare to the rounded elbow, on the white tablecloth, to which they did no shame. "I want to know all about your friends, Richard, and though you must have many, you do not seem to talk very much about them."

"I know swarms of human beings, but I have few friends—only a few fellows of the Parthenon who are as true as steel, and this lady, the Countess von Reutensee, whom I am most anxious for you to meet."

"An old lady?" said Helen inquiringly. "I am waiting to hear everything about her. How delightful to think that I shall so soon meet one of your friends!"

Woodgate felt and even looked a trifle embarrassed. The history of his friendship with Hilda von Reutensee was a

curious one, one, moreover, which Helen would not at present be likely to understand. Platonic friendships, so dangerously like love affairs, were not accepted or understood in the Dale.

"Well, you see, Helen, it's a long story. To begin with, the Countess is not old; in fact, she can't be more than a year or two your senior, if even that; and she is very clever, a sort of patron saint of all the struggling literary folk in London."

"How wonderful and how interesting! I am so glad she is coming, Richard! How fortunate we had not gone on! I shall be a little afraid, I think, of her title first, and then of her ability. Is she pleasant and simple in her manner?"

"She is charming, her manner perfect. You will say so when you see her; and she is as beautiful as a dream."

The brightness on Helen's face clouded ever so slightly at the warmth of her husband's tone. She was only a four-weeks' wife, remember, and jealous of his affection. But she put the momentary pang from her swiftly as unworthy, and asked yet another question, with a slight touch of wistfulness in her voice.

"She has read all you have written, I suppose, Richard?"

"Every line of it, and pulled it unmercifully to pieces," he answered quickly. "She is a remorseless critic, and her taste and judgment are unerring."

"Has she written books herself?"

"Not yet; though she will. She must; we all expect it of her. But she has the courage of restraint, a rare virtue in our world, Helen, and will wait till she can give the best that is in her."

"What a woman she must be! and how fortunate for you to have such a friend!" said Helen in her genuine simplicity.

"Will her husband come with her to-morrow?"

"He will not," replied Woodgate, and he again looked embarrassed. He was about to try Helen, and somewhat feared the consequences; but since such shocks would await her on every hand when they returned to London, it was well the first ones should meet her here. "She and her husband do not agree—and they do not meet."

At another time Woodgate might have enjoyed the look of blank dismay which instantly overspread his wife's face, but somehow it seemed to irritate him oddly.

"They do not agree, and they do not meet," she repeated slowly. "That means, I suppose, that they do not live together. Why?"

"Because the Count is a fool and a scoundrel. She was married to him against her will when she was a mere child. When she became a woman, and understood things, she left him. There was no alternative."

Helen sat in silence, but the look of lively interest had died out of her face.

"I don't agree with you," she said coldly. "But perhaps I oughtn't to judge, being ignorant of the circumstances. Has she any children?"

"One, a son, whom she is compelled to leave in his grandmother's care in a God-forgotten schloss somewhere among the wilds of Unter Francon. She is allowed to visit him there once a year, and is on her way to him now. She has had a hard life of it, Helen. I hoped you would give her the womanly sympathy and tenderness such women as you know so well how to give, though, Heaven knows! you can steel your hearts, too, like flint."

The passionate bitterness with which he spoke stirred a strange new and painful chord in the heart of the woman who listened to him. She could not say how or why, but in a moment of time a shadow had fallen athwart her life, and she felt a vague dread of the coming day.

"I hope I shall not be wanting in sympathy or tenderness where they are required," she said quietly; "but of course it was something of a shock to me to hear that she lived apart from her husband. I have not been used to such things in the Dale."

"No; in the Dale they hate each other like poison, and hide it for the sake of respectability," he said grimly. "I warn you, Helen, you will receive many such shocks in the world to which you are going, in which there are a few brave

souls, such as Hilda Reutensee, who have the courage of their opinions, and I hope that the issue will be that you will not refuse them the honour and the respect they deserve."

Never had Helen seen him so earnest; he spoke with real eloquence, and pushed back the hair from his brow with a quick, nervous gesture, indicative of inward emotion. For the moment she was permitted a glimpse of genuine enthusiasm, and realised what he might be capable of when so moved. It gave her faithful heart a dull pang that she had not yet been able to kindle in him anything approaching to it. She had never seen him aught but gay, careless, light of heart; sometimes, indeed, she had thought he regarded life too much in the light of a perpetual holiday.

"I shall do my best to be kind to this lady, keeping her misfortunes in view, Richard, but above all because she is your friend."

She said this with such dignity and sweetness that Woodgate, by no means hard of heart, was melted at once. He came quickly to her side, and, twining his arm round her, kissed her fondly.

"Now there spoke my own wife, my pearl of womanhood. I have dreamed a dream, my Helen, of showing to my world, in which there are many shams and only a few realities, a perfect woman, with a pure eye and a large, serene, generous heart, free from every prejudice, so peerless in her own absolute purity and tenderness, that she could touch even the vilest without taint, and by her contact make them clean."

Moved by the passion of his words, she leaned against him trembling like a child.

"It is a great deal to ask of one frail woman, Richard," she cried, with a sob. "I am so ignorant myself and so full of faults; but, God helping me, I shall try to be what you desire, and you will help me too."

CHAPTER X

"There is a sting—peculiar, sad, and keen,
Known to a woman's heart."



THAT night Helen could not sleep. She seemed to realise for the first time the great and sharp contrast between the old life and the new, and to feel, with a vague, strange restlessness, that peace abode with the past, turmoil with the future. She anticipated the morrow when she should meet the first of her husband's friends as we anticipate a crisis in life. She tried to brace herself for it, to think of her meeting with this gifted woman of whom Richard thought so highly, and even prayed that all prejudice might leave her, and that she would be able at once to recognise all that was noble in her, giving to her the honour and respect she surely deserved. Woodgate, troubled by no such thoughts, slept soundly, but dreamed towards morning of the same theme which occupied his wife's thoughts—a troubled dream, haunted by a love-story of which Helen had no knowledge. With the morning Helen's darker thoughts vanished; the sunshine glittering on the river seemed to dispel the clouds from her imagination, and her face betrayed her usual serenity of heart.

"When will the Countess arrive, Richard?" she asked, as they sat at breakfast. "Did she say?"

"Yes; by the evening train, due somewhere about seven, isn't it? Do you remember when we came?"

"Yes; if I order dinner for eight, will that do?"

Richard looked up, greatly surprised and pleased.

"You will ask her to dine with us, then? Thank you, my dear."

"Why, of course; could I do any less, Richard, as she is coming to this hotel and you are old friends? What did you expect me to do?"

Woodgate laughed.

"Faith, I don't know; you froze me up, you know, last night, when I told you the Countess's unhappy story, and I should not have cared to hint at such a thing as an invitation to dinner."

Helen was a trifle hurt, but concealed it under a smile.

"I shall grow wiser by experience, Richard. You must not be too hard on me at first.

"Heaven forbid that I should ever be hard on you, first or last," he said, fervently enough, for her humility, her wifely anxiety to please, touched him to the heart. Although he would not have acknowledged it, he felt secretly a great deal more nervous over the meeting of these two women than Helen could possibly be, she having the advantage of unconsciousness. "Now, what shall we do to-day? Ferrara, as we had arranged?"

"Oh, I think not; it might make a pleasant outing for the Countess when she is here."

"It is all old ground to her, Helen, as you can understand when I tell you that she has wintered in Florence or Rome every year since she left Reutensee."

"And the other part of the year?" said Helen inquiringly. "Has she a home in London?"

"Yes; in Park Lane."

"In Park Lane? Is she then very rich?"

"Reutensee allows her handsomely. She has always said he is not mean with his money. I suppose she is comfortably off; there is every evidence of it."

Helen gave an involuntary sigh.

"Do you think," she asked, a trifle wistfully, "that she

will care to talk to me? I am not brilliant, Richard. Perhaps she will despise me."

"She won't. There is one quality you possess for which she has a reverential worship, and that is goodness."

"She must be very good herself, then," said Helen thoughtfully. "Well, let us have an idle day, Richard. I shall want a great many fresh flowers for the evening, and will go to the marketplace. Let us go for another hour or two to the Uffizzi till lunch."

"Very well; arrange the day as you like. And will you speak about the Countess's rooms, and tell them she will join our table while she is here?"

"I shall. It is almost like entertaining visitors, yet with no house. How odd!" said Helen brightly, feeling as if she had a new interest in life.

All day Woodgate was not himself, and his restlessness was quite evident to Helen, but she did not resent it. She thought it natural enough that he should be pleasurably excited at the thought of meeting so old and distinguished a friend; and she hoped she would be able to play her part well, and do him credit. She was not a vain woman; nor is it vanity in any woman to desire to make the most of her attractions, provided she does not make it the business of her life. Helen was not surprised when her husband went out after tea, and supposed that he had gone to the railway station.

Such, however, was not the case. He had simply taken himself out of the way, in order to avoid the meeting between his wife and Hilda von Reutensee. When he returned to the hotel at a quarter to eight he learned that the Countess had arrived half an hour before, and when he entered the dressing-room Helen was not there. She dressed early and with extreme care, selecting a handsome gown of rich, soft black silk, made with a sweeping train, and some fine lace, the gift of Madame Douglas, in the bodice.

Just as her husband was inquiring in the hall whether the Countess had arrived, she went along the corridor and tapped at that lady's door.

"Come in," called out a clear, ringing, slightly imperious voice, and immediately there was a swift step across the floor and the door was quickly opened.

For an instant those two women, whose destinies were to be so strangely intermingled, regarded each other with a critical, questioning air.

"I am Mrs. Woodgate," said Helen, with her quiet, gracious dignity, which she had never shown to greater advantage. "And I come to bid you welcome, and to inquire whether you find everything as you desire it?"

"You are Mrs. Woodgate?" repeated the Countess slowly, and her eyes never for a moment left Helen's face. "Oh, pray come in. I am not quite dressed; you see, I never bring a maid with me abroad, it completely demoralises them, and when one has to unpack, it takes a little time."

"Let me help you," said Helen, with a rare, sweet smile, which made the Countess regard her attentively again, and in complete silence.

"You are very good. I have taken out the gown I want; the others can wait till I have time to attend to them," she said, and, with a curious expression on her face, she returned to the dressing-table. "Won't you sit down?"

"I should much rather hang up your dresses in the wardrobe, if you will allow me," said Helen pleasantly.

"Very well, thank you, you may."

Helen turned to the large dress-basket, which, standing open, revealed its wealth of silks and laces, and the Countess continued her hairdressing in a curious silence not common to her.

There could be no doubt about her beauty, which of its kind—fair skin and bright gold hair—was perfect. She wore a white loose dressing-gown, which concealed, but did not hide, the extreme grace of her figure. Helen admired her exceedingly, but wondered a little at her silence.

"Mr. Woodgate met you, I suppose?" she said inquiringly, as she hung up the last gown and closed the door of the wardrobe.

"No, he did not," replied the Countess, taking up her hand mirror to survey the shining coils of her hair. "Nor did I expect it. I am used to arriving and departing unattended. It has its advantages, I do assure you."

"Yes," said Helen. "I am surprised that Richard did not meet you; I was certain he had gone for the purpose."

"I have not seen him, I assure you. Is this your first visit to Florence?"

"Yes. I have never been out of Scotland before," replied Helen simply.

"Never been out of Scotland before?" repeated the Countess, with a slight inexplicable smile. "I envy you, for you will not be a stranger to new sensations. Been married a month, haven't you?"

"Yes; a month to-morrow."

"Well, you have married a very clever man, Mrs. Woodgate, and I know of a score of women who owe you a grudge for it. He has stolen a march upon us all."

"Did he not even tell you, who are so old and valued a friend."

The Countess was fastening the waistband of her dainty lilac silk gown. She threw up her head suddenly and looked at Helen with keen inquiry.

"Now, what has he said to her, I wonder?" she said to herself. "How much, or how little does she know?"

"My dear," she observed aloud, "my first knowledge of the affair was seeing the announcement of it in the *Times* a fortnight old at Genoa. The same paper said you were here in this very hotel, so I came out of my way to have a look at you."

Helen blushed slightly. The woman puzzled her. The familiarity of her speech, the candour of her words, while they did not exactly offend, certainly "exercised" her, as they say in the Dale.

"We are very glad to see you; my husband is, I know, and I, to make the acquaintance of the friend he values so highly," she said sincerely.

Her words had a curious effect on Hilda von Reutensee. Her face became crimson, and a visible tremble was on her lips.

"You are very kind—you are truthful, sincere. I thank you. I trust I may be worthy of your kind thoughts of me."

That was sufficient to touch Helen to the quick. How marvellous that so distinguished a woman should use such words to her! She accepted them as a proof that great souls are ever humble in their estimate of self.

"You are not in the least like my expectation of you," said the Countess presently, as she put the last touches to her elegant toilet. "We talked of new sensations a minute ago—you have given me one."

Helen laughed, a musical, happy laugh, feeling herself more at home with her new friend than she had yet done.

"You have given me one also. I have never met any one like you."

"What do you mean? I should like an explanation of those words. In what way am I different from other people?"

"You are much more beautiful, for one thing. I am quite sure I have never seen anyone so beautiful as you in my whole life."

"Oh, Mrs. Woodgate, you give me another new sensation! Do you know, in the world I live in, there is not a woman who would say such a thing to me. You are as refreshing as the morning dew."

"I am but saying what I think. Why should I not say it, if it does not give you offence?"

"I ought to pay you as sweet a compliment in return, but I will not to-day, though I have it in my heart. I am quite ready now. You have asked me to dine with you, I understand, and I have never even thanked you for it."

"Why should you? Shall we go now? I hope and expect my husband will be waiting for us in the saloon. I cannot understand yet why he did not go to meet you. He must have missed you in the crowd. Yes, I am sure that is the explanation."

She led the way from the room, the Countess following,

admiring the poise of her dark head, the straight, lissome lines of her figure, the grace of her carriage. She was a beautiful woman herself, and possessed of a fair share of personal vanity, but she was generous in her appreciation of beauty in others. She admired Woodgate's wife; and those few minutes had shown to her that the attractive casket held a pure, bright, womanly soul.

Woodgate awaited them in the saloon, looking animated, but a trifle disturbed. No such consciousness troubled the Countess, who possessed the consummate tact of a very clever woman.

"Your wife and I have already made acquaintance, Mr. Woodgate," she said, with a smile which might be called purely conventional; "and I congratulate you, a thousand times."

Helen took her place at the table, beaming upon them. The ordeal was over: she had met Richard's greatest friend, and found her wholly charming; she now prepared herself for a delightful hour. She was ready and willing to sit silent, so that she might listen to the talk of these two, who were such old friends and understood each other so well. Woodgate, relieved of the momentary awkwardness, began to talk in a strain which astonished his wife. It was of people and things of which she of course knew nothing, and it seemed to her that he had become another man. The Countess did not say very much, a word or sentence now and again, perhaps only an appreciative smile, which was enough to stimulate the current of his thought. Once or twice, feeling how completely Helen was left out, she turned to her gently, and tried to engage her in conversation. But Woodgate, carried away by a fascination old yet ever new to him, seemed impatient of it, and once when the Countess ignored him completely to speak to Helen, he said rather quickly—

"I am sure Helen does not mind. Do you, Helen? You know I have told you how the Countess understands all my work. Just let me tell you this, and then I will be silent the rest of the evening, if you like."

Then he went on again, speaking for the first time in Helen's

hearing of his contemplated new work, laying it before Hilda von Reutensee in very minute detail.

It was impossible that the wife to whom such things were sacred, and who had prayed that she might be made worthy to share all his aspirations, should not feel the distinction made. It cut her to the heart, but she kept her face calm and brave, and even smiled with eyes which had a cloud of tears behind them.

CHAPTER XI

"Is there no debt to pay,
No boon to grant?"

THE clergyman of the Scotch church called at the hotel at nine o'clock, asking to see Mrs. Woodgate. She went downstairs to the room where he waited, leaving her husband and their guest together. It was an opportunity both desired.

Hilda von Reutensee had several questions to ask; questions she could not give utterance to in the wife's presence. When the door closed upon them, she leaned back in her chair and regarded him with a curious mixture of wonder and inquiry.

"I want to know, Richard, why you have married your wife," she said; "can it be possible that you care for her? If so, I have more hope of you than I have had for many a day."

It was an odd way to put it. He looked at her intently, thinking she looked ten times more charming than ever. He had loved her for years, and no other woman could influence him as she had done and did. She could play upon his nature as skilfully as her fingers could play upon the harp strings. He had amused and interested her; she had even allowed him to make love to her after a certain harmless fashion, and she had wondered a little over his marriage, feeling it perhaps slightly as a disappointment. But she was perfectly heart-whole where he was concerned, and, in spite of her many coquetries, at heart a pure and good woman.

"Faith, you ask what I can hardly answer," he replied evasively. "What do you think of her?"

"I do not yet understand how you have won such a woman," she said, mistaking his avoidance of the question. "Those eyes of hers are made to see through shams. She will see through you yet, Richard."

He laughed a trifle bitterly.

"You are as complimentary as ever, Hilda," he said. "In other words, you regard me as a sham—is that it?"

"You imagine yourself to be a great man, which you are not," she replied calmly, "and never will be until you are first humbled with yourself. It is old ground, Richard; we need not go over it again; but I say again, with such a woman by your side, there is more hope for you than I imagined. She will stimulate you to the highest endeavour, and make you ashamed of the idleness your friends have long deplored."

"You think very highly of her," he said, secretly flattered—as men are to hear praise of their wives, which, of course, reflects credit on their own wisdom in selection.

"I do. She is a woman worth cultivating. I have known you a long time, Richard, and I am privileged to be candid. I have only known your wife one hour, but while listening to your nonsense I have been watching her. She is not ordinary or commonplace. Be careful how you deal with her."

"I wish you would explain yourself," he said, a trifle impatiently. "I think her quite ordinary, and her views of life are puritanical in the extreme, which, of course, is inevitable, considering what her environment has been for six-and-twenty years."

"That is her age, is it? She looks it. I hardly expected that you would understand her, and I cannot comprehend, as I said, how you won her. As to her views, they will expand, but the process will hurt her. I trust I may be fortunate enough to win and keep her friendship."

He looked at her in amazement, scarcely crediting what he heard. He had dreaded Hilda von Reutensee's verdict on his wife, and he could not understand the impression made. That

the Countess was sincere he knew her too well to doubt. She was one of the most candid and outspoken of living women, and she had never spared him. She was very clever, and she had been trained in a hard school, which had done something to take the edge off her womanliness. She had a large acquaintance among literary people, and when Woodgate was first introduced to her by a journalistic friend, she had become deeply interested in his career. It was then full of promise, which had as yet not been fulfilled. Sometimes she feared he had reached the zenith of his powers, the period of idle dalliance had been so much prolonged.

"I am sure Helen would be flattered if she knew the impression she has made on you," he said, a trifle drily.

"I don't believe she would. She is a woman to whom self is not specially interesting, and she is a fine foil to you. One piece of advice to you, Richard, before she returns. She loves you; do not starve that love. Don't disillusion unless you cannot help it, and try to be worthy of her."

She rose with the air of a woman who had said the last word, and, moving to the window, made some trivial remarks about the beauty of the night. Presently they heard Helen's feet on the corridor; then she turned to him.

"Henceforth I am Countess to you, Mr. Woodgate. Please do not forget."

It was her first act of absolute loyalty to the woman she had known for one hour, but whose friendship she already desired as something worth the winning. It said much for Helen, because the Countess was not one of those molluscs who fasten on every new-comer, offering vows of eternal devotion. On the contrary, among women her friends were few.

Helen entered the room, smiling, unconscious, animated.

"Oh, Richard, I have had such a pleasant talk with Mr. Martin. He knew papa at college, and has been to Broadrule. He says he remembers me a little girl, and thinks he also saw you. I asked him to come up, but he says he will call again. I hope I am excused, Countess, leaving you so long alone."

The Countess smiled and shook her head, but said nothing.

Her heart was too much touched for speech. There was something at once so childlike and trusting about Woodgate's wife, that the woman of the world, who had proved to the utmost its hypocrisy and its cruelty, felt a great compassion in her soul. Woodgate, feeling that in their present mood conversation was not likely to move freely, asked permission to smoke his cigar outside, thus giving Hilda von Reutensee another opportunity she desired. She sat down near to Helen, looking at her intently, her own face wearing a look of indescribable tenderness, which fascinated the woman who had called it forth.

"Will you tell me," she said gently, "what your husband has said to you about me?"

"He did not say very much," replied Helen, in some surprise. "Only yesterday, when your letter came, he told me you were his friend, and that you had helped him greatly in his work. Also," she added, with a faint flush and slight hesitation, "something of your sad history; that was all."

"I am not so much to be commiserated," replied the Countess lightly, "since my husband leaves me in peace."

"But," said Helen, still reluctantly, "you are parted from your little son. Can anything compensate for that?"

"I do not permit myself to dwell on it; and the child is very well off where he is, with his grandaunt. She's very kind to him, and is good enough not to bring him up to hate his mother."

"Your husband's kinswoman?" said Helen inquiringly.

"Yes; my own mother is dead. I do not remember her. Had she lived, I should not be as I am. It is a very remote place where my little Gustav has to dwell, but good for the child. Heavens! what a place that God-forgotten Schloss is! and yet people live long lives there, and appear to be content. Perhaps they are better off than such as we."

"You are on your way there now, my husband tells me."

"I am, but I do not hurry, till the snow is off the ground."

"And is your husband there? Excuse these many questions; it is because I am so interested."

"Don't apologise; I like to answer them, because, odd as it

may seem, I should like you to understand me. No, Ludwig von Reutensee is not at the Schloss, else there would require to be another arrangement made for Gustav and I to meet. It is too slow a place altogether for him. I expect he is in Paris now. The Schloss seldom sees him,—a month, perhaps, in autumn, when there is anything to shoot,—and they are all glad when he goes away.”

“Except the old lady, who, perhaps, regards him as a son?” suggested Helen.

“She doesn’t; she can’t endure him. It is the only point on which we are agreed—detestation of Graf Ludwig. You see, he reminds her of her own broken hopes. She had a splendid husband, who was killed gloriously, as they call it, at Gravelotte, and one son, Waldemar, who fell ignominiously in a duel about some peasant girl. It nearly killed his mother. Properly speaking, she ought to have retired from Reutensee to her own home in Thuringia, but she adores the place, and Ludwig, who has some bowels of compassion in him, allows her to remain, and she repays him by looking after Gustav, and training him in the way he should go.”

“If he had such bowels of compassion as you speak of, he would give the boy to you,” said Helen hotly.

“Ah! but he must punish me somehow for my desertion, and he chooses that way because I feel it most.”

“Why did you desert him?” asked Helen involuntarily.

“Because I could not live with him; he was too thoroughly bad. Consider, I was married to him at seventeen; forced into it by my aunt, who reared me, and had but one desire—to get rid of me. I bore it as long as I could, and because I had some shreds of self-respect left, I left him at last, ten years ago.”

“And you now live in London?”

“I have a home there; a little house in Park Lane, I made Ludwig buy for me. He is not stingy with money, I will say that for him; he has some of the instincts of a gentleman left.”

“He cannot be wholly bad, since he is so generous to you,” said Helen, thinking the man to be pitied who had so charming a wife who declined to live with him.

"He is not totally bad; he has his good qualities, like the best and worst of us, but the bad is such as no self-respecting woman could tolerate. Oh, I thought it well over, I assure you, before I made my decision, because I knew very well what it involved for me; and I have never regretted it."

Helen remained silent; a great wonder of thought awakened in her mind. Suddenly the Countess changed the subject.

"Will you tell me frankly, Mrs. Woodgate, what is your opinion of your husband's work?"

Helen flushed all over. It was a delicate, almost a sacred subject in her eyes. "I am his wife," she answered simply. "I can have but one opinion regarding it."

The faintest shadow of an amused smile flickered momentarily on the Countess's fair face, but immediately passed, leaving it grave as before.

"Only a very young man could have written that last book of his, but it had the true ring. Five years have passed since it appeared, and no successor is forthcoming. Has he given us, do you think, all that is in him?"

The flush on Helen's face deepened, but the Countess continued, never seeing that her listener was fiercely resenting every word she uttered.

"If he ever writes another book, it will be something so entirely different that men will not know it to be by the same hand."

"Why do you say *if* he writes another book? You heard what he said to you to-night," cried Helen hotly.

"I have heard all that before," replied the Countess calmly. "My dear, you must rouse him from this indolence and self-complacency, which is killing his soul. It is a pity—I have said it a hundred times—that he has any money, that he has not to earn his bread."

"I do not believe that," said Helen quickly. "I have heard him say that sordid care eats the heart out of a man, and grinds his aspirations to the dust."

"It is not true, and very well he knows it. Genius has ever risen to its highest heights out of desperate straits. Suffering

is its baptism of fire. He will never suffer, because he will not allow himself to suffer. He dreads it."

"How dare you speak so to me of my husband?" cried Helen, stung beyond endurance.

Hilda von Reutensee leaned forward slightly and laid her hands, with a touch of infinite gentleness, on Helen's knee. "Hush, child! I am your true friend, and his."

"Do not call me child; I am older than you," said Helen, still with some of the petulance of a child.

"No; I am thirty-one. Besides, I have had a long, hard experience of life. You are only beginning it. When you come to London, I shall show you one I have in my mind's eye at this moment; a poor boy, to whom circumstances have been relentless, but who is slowly conquering them all. He comes to me sometimes, finding in me something which inspires his confidence, though Heaven knows I am but little worthy; and I help him with words and sympathy always, and sometimes with money, though not often, because the fight will make him strong."

Helen's resentment vanished, and her face shone. "I was rude to you a moment ago; pray forgive me. You are very good; you must be, to do such things."

"Oh no. It pleases me to think that some portion of Ludwig von Reutensee's money should be not unworthily spent. Just let me say what I wish to say about your husband, for the first and last time. You are a noble and good woman; that I know from your face; but in some respects I am wiser than you, with the wisdom born of experience of the world. Woodgate has a great gift, which he is sinfully neglecting, he is so indolent." She continued, in her voice of relentless calm, "I have long told him that if the divine spark had fled from him for ever, he had deserved it well. His future now rests with you. You must be very wise, so wise that for any one but you I should say it was impossible. You must not pamper and worship and spoil him, as half the men who might achieve something are spoiled by the women who love them. Forgive my plain speech; when you know me better, perhaps you will not resent it, as you must now."

"I don't," said Helen; "but you bewilder and sadden me, and—and I think there is truth in what you say."

Hilda von Reutensee guessed what it cost Helen to make that admission, but she made no comment upon it.

"I think I shall go to bed. Will you make my apologies to your husband, please? We shall meet to-morrow."

She stood straight in front of Helen and held out her hand, with a look of winning appeal.

"I have never met anybody in the least like you," she said hurriedly. "I do not pray much, only that my son may not grow up like his father; but I will pray to-night for your friendship. Good-night!"

Helen was not quick to respond, because the woman surprised and puzzled her on every hand. While she still waited, slow, like all of the northern clime, to respond to any unexpected demonstration of feeling, the Countess glided away and left her alone.

CHAPTER XII

"Whate'er betide,
To thee I will be true."



OW long are you going to remain at Reutensee?" asked Woodgate, as they breakfasted together next morning.

"I am promised a month. Do you not remember?" said the Countess.

"And when are you going?"

"Soon, I think. The old lady writes that they have spring already, and that the flowers are coming up. I was once there in March, and the cold was intense. Often they have a mild February, so I think I shall go straight on."

"And at the end of the month, what then?"

The Countess shrugged her shoulders. "I don't know. I do not make many plans now, Mr. Woodgate," she said, turning to Helen, who looked her best in the clear morning light, as most healthy persons do. She wore a tailor-gown of light grey tweed, faultless linen, and no jewellery. The Countess was all ruffles and lace, as becoming as the set simplicity of Helen's attire was to her.

"We must plan a little," replied Helen, with a smile. "I wish I knew where we were going, and when we are likely to have a home."

"My wife has not acquired the vagabond habit yet," said Woodgate, with a smile. "She thinks happiness is bounded

by the four walls of a house, where they too often only shut it out."

"Don't say that, Richard; you know you do not believe it," said Helen quickly.

"London will be your permanent home, I suppose," remarked the Countess.

"Probably. But there is nothing settled. Like you, I don't believe in planning; things left to themselves arrange somehow."

Helen shook her head. "I can't accept that doctrine. I have an orderly mind, which likes to see its way clearly before it."

"Then you miss all the pleasure of perpetual surprises, my love," said Woodgate lightly. "I say, Countess, is there any accommodation for strangers in your village of Reutensee?"

"There is the usual village gasthaus, where coffee and sauerkraut can be obtained," replied the Countess, looking at him rather questioningly. "I have never been at it, but I know such a place exists, because I have heard the Gräfin speak of the worthy couple who manage it. But why do you ask?"

"Is the place interesting, and the scenery good?"

"The place is dead; the scenery, of its kind, good. There are miles upon miles of pine woods, and the village itself is set, not unpicturesquely, on the edge of the lake which lies before the Schloss."

"Do you think we could support existence there for some weeks, while I make a bold attempt to put *Brunehilde* into shape?"

Helen listened intently, her soul in her eyes.

"There is no reason why you should not support existence there as well as anywhere, if you intend to work. It would be very slow for Mrs. Woodgate, though my kinswoman would, of course, pay her the common courtesies of the place. It might be the very place in which to write your *Brunehilde*. The air is heavy with legends, the people simple and guileless as babes."

"Let us go there, Richard," cried Helen, and all the hidden anxiety of her wish to see her husband once more put his hand

to some worthy work betrayed itself to Hilda von Reutensee, though it was lost on him.

"Would it not be possible for us to travel together?" suggested Woodgate; "and while you are at the Schloss, my wife would not be absolutely without society."

"I would advise you to wait, at least, two months in the south first," replied the Countess in a tone which Woodgate knew to be decisive. "In April Reutensee is enchanting, quite enchanting. There is a great deal for Mrs. Woodgate to see first. Surely you do not mean to be so near Rome and not visit it?"

Woodgate was disappointed, and showed it in his face as he rose.

"Oh, well, we can leave things as they were, Helen, and go whither the spirit moves us," he said carelessly. "The Countess shows quite plainly that however much we may desire the pleasure of her society, she does not share it."

It was an entirely characteristic speech. He could not brook disappointment or contradiction. Helen could not help regarding him in pained surprise. That he should speak so discourteously to a lady amazed and wounded her. It had no effect on the Countess but to make her smile. She had seen him in every mood.

"Men are not philosophers, Mrs. Woodgate," she said, her voice taking the caressing tone which Helen seemed to call forth. "Your husband takes it into his head he would like to go to Reutensee forthwith, and because I, who know what I am talking about in this instance, do not advise it, then he is savage with me. You must teach him your own sweet reasonableness, a quality in which he is sadly lacking."

The whole tone of the conversation jarred upon Helen, and she showed it in her face. It hurt her that another woman should lay her finger relentlessly on the flaw in her idol. She had the instinct of every true wife, to cover up every slight deficiency from the world.

"How long are you going to stay here?" inquired Woodgate, changing the subject.

"Till to-morrow. I have a visit to pay at Spezia, and another in Munich, so I shall get to Reutensee by degrees."

"Helen, you and I had better go on to Rome to-morrow," he said then, quite decisively for him. "I must go and attend to my letters."

Helen was silent when he left the room, and on her brow a cloud remained.

"You are vexed, Mrs. Woodgate; and, believe me, I understand it a great deal better than you imagine. You will have innumerable such trials of temper and patience; try and accept them as the portion of the woman who of her own choice weds a man of genius."

Helen turned her face away. Two thoughts filled her heart with bitterness hard to be borne: one, that her husband should fall so far short of the ideal she had raised; the other, that another woman should dare to speak so frankly of the faults his wife would scarcely admit.

"I cannot bear it; indeed I cannot," she said at length, hotly and passionately.

Quick-witted though she was, Hilda von Reutensee this time entirely misunderstood her.

"You will get used to it, my dear, as we all do to what is disagreeable, after we admit that it is inevitable," she said soothingly.

Then Helen turned, and her face was deeply flushed, her eyes flashing a most unusual fire.

"It is not that. It is intolerable to me to discuss my husband with you or any stranger. I will not do it. If we are to be friendly at all, we must not talk of him."

The Countess took a step backward with an altered face, and in her soul a sincere respect for the woman before her.

"I ask your pardon," she said, with humility, which was all grace. "I spoke in sincerity, but I understand and will obey you, because I do desire your friendship. It is worth the winning and keeping; we shall meet, I suppose, in London before the year is out. I generally drift back to my own house about September, and remain till as near Christmas as

the fogs will permit. If you are to settle in London at all, I should think it will be by then. Have I your permission to call upon you? You will be true with me, I know, and I shall not take offence."

"I do trust you will call. Pray forget my hasty words. Everything is new to me. Perhaps when we meet in London I shall be more of a philosopher; and one thing I am almost certain of, that I may need your friendship."

"Thank you for that, at least. I shall go on to my friends at Spezia, I think, this afternoon. There is nothing to keep me in Florence; and I have seen you."

The Countess kept her own room for the remainder of the morning, and left the hotel without saying good-bye to Woodgate. Helen and she parted like friends, with a regret on either side, though Helen was conscious also of a certain sense of relief. There was no manner of doubt that her coming had unsettled Woodgate, and made him curiously cross and hasty of speech. Jealousy had as yet no part in Helen's nature; she simply imagined that a talk with his old friend had made him crave for the excitement of the circles he had left. When he joined her at tea, and learned that she had just been to the station to bid their guest *bon voyage*, he seemed at once astonished and chagrined. "Ah, well, Helen, let her go; we are better without her. She came into our little Eden just like a serpent, didn't she? She used to be a good sort, interested in a fellow's welfare and all that but, of course, marriage makes a difference to the women of one's acquaintance, only I was not quite prepared for so marked a difference."

Helen felt tempted to inquire what her demeanour had been before, that he should be able to detect in a manner wholly interested and friendly a marked difference. But she wisely refrained, simply remarking, "I thought she could not well be more interested in your welfare and your work than she seemed."

"Ah, well, she allowed me to talk. She will not flatter, you see, Helen; she is a true friend as far as that goes."

"Richard, she is afraid for your future. If it is true what

she says, you have done very little for a long time. You will work by and by, dear, will you not?"

In her earnestness she leaned forward, laying her hand on his knee. Her attitude and expression touched him, though her words carried a stab to a conscience not yet quite dead.

"Now, dearest, you must not degenerate into a taskmistress, like Hilda von Reutensee, who is never happy unless drilling somebody. Don't you know that such work as mine cannot be forced, that spontaneity is its hall-mark? I trust I shall never degenerate into a hack."

"But, Richard, if you were a poor man, what then?"

"I should work with my hands and be content," he replied lightly. "I will begin this work by and by. It is taking shape; but you must give me my own time. Nobody really understands literary work except those who do it. I have the greatest possible contempt, as all admirers of true art must have, for those imitators who turn out their book or picture annually for sale, just as the yearling short-horns are sold to the highest bidder."

He spoke scathingly, and Helen held her peace, though having on the tip of her tongue the names of many conscientious workers who gave of their best to the world from time to time, worshipping art as truly as its independent devotees, though compelled to have regard also to its sordid gains, and among these were names which the world delighted to honour.

From that day, though she said but little, her anxiety seldom slept. On the morrow they departed to Rome, where, in her enchantment over its revelations, she grew less heavy of heart. From Rome to Naples, and thence to Sorrento, where they remained some weeks. Time did not hang heavily, there was much to see, and Woodgate seemed desirous that she should miss nothing. March saw them in Venice, early April in Meran, where they also lingered a while. The enchanting spring beauty of that lovely region moved the soul of Woodgate to sundry graceful verses which found their way to the magazines, and gave his contemporaries a hint of his where-

abouts. These verses, the idle pleasure of a morning, were all he had to show for four months of precious time. His indolence was colossal. He talked much of the holiday he had earned, which he meant so thoroughly to enjoy. Helen sometimes felt tempted to ask in what manner he had earned it. That he should trifle away each day in utter idleness, unhaunted by any accusing thought, seemed to her, fresh from a home which had a duty allotted to every hour, a truly dreadful thing. Although there was every temptation to her to idle also, she filled her days with occupation, finding each day too short for all she wished to accomplish.

She had a considerable talent for drawing, and filled her sketch-book as they journeyed, intending it as a birthday gift for her father. She read much also, and had generally a piece of feminine work in hand. Often Woodgate made a jest of her industry, calling her his busy bee, but it never occurred to him to think it a tacit reproach to him. She made a mistake, perhaps, in keeping her thoughts so much to herself as she did; but her one attempt to rouse him had not been a conspicuous success, and she did not care to repeat it. She strove to be an intelligent and agreeable companion to him, and to sustain her heart with the hope that when they should be settled in their own home, he would give his heart to his new work. Sometimes her longing for that day was almost intolerable. She was not of the stuff of which good vagabonds are made, nor did she ever grow accustomed to the perpetual changing from place to place, or find in the ever-shifting scenes of continental hotels anything to compensate for the absence of a home. But to Woodgate these were the wine of life.

"Meran is getting too full, Helen," he said one day. "It is time for us to move on."

"Home?" said Helen wistfully; and had he looked at her, he must have seen the dimness in her eyes.

"No; I have thought of Reutensee, which, according to the Countess, will now be at its best. Do you know it is the 24th of April already?"

"I know," replied Helen. Had she not of late hungrily

counted the days? "Will you work at Reutensee, do you think, Richard? If not, what is the use of going?"

"That is my object, dearest. I have promised the Countess proofs of *Brunehilde* in September, when we have all returned to town."

Helen's face brightened. She became like a child in her simple gladness over a definite promise.

Next night they slept at Munich on their way to Würzburg.

CHAPTER XIII

"Far from the madding crowd."

HE Schloss and village of Reutensee were situated among dense pinewoods, about ten English miles from the old town of Würzburg. It was quite dark when a heavy and lumbering carriage, containing the two English travellers and their belongings, rumbled up the quaint village street and entered the courtyard of the little inn. The landlord and his motherly-looking spouse made haste to welcome the travellers, though haunted by sundry misgivings as to the capabilities of their modest hostelry to satisfy the requirements of such distinguished guests.

The Germans have an exaggerated idea of the extravagance and luxury indulged in by the English, especially in the matter of food and household accommodation. Therefore the worthy couple of the Reutensee Eagle received their guests in no little fear and trembling. But the charming and simple manners of the lady, and the no less happy demeanour of the gentleman, sufficed to put them at their ease, and they made haste to offer the best the inn could afford. Helen was very tired, and, after partaking of supper, was glad to retire to rest in the queer, bare, little room, with its two wooden beds and primitive furnishings, and the long, low, latticed window overlooking the courtyard.

When she awoke, it was nine o'clock, and a glorious May

morning, the sun shining in a cloudless sky, his beneficent beams having long since dried the dewdrops on grass and hedge and tree. Peering over the neat muslin blind, she obtained a good view of the clean, cool courtyard, with its little tables set under the spreading trees, a couple of peasants chatting over their morning beer, adding the necessary touch of life to the scene. The courtyard from one side opened into an orchard, in which the trees were already tinged with the white and pink earnest of the rich harvest which never failed; and through those lovely masses she caught the gleam and shimmer of the waters of the lake, which gave the place its name. The air, when a little later she opened the casement, was odorous of the pines, and over all there seemed to brood the spirit of a peace which made the busy scenes they had left seem far off and unreal. Woodgate was not less charmed with that old-world spot than Helen.

"If the thing is ever to be written," he said, "it will be written here. It is like a bit of Arcady."

It indeed seemed as if the inspiration for which Helen had longed and prayed had come at last. Every morning he shut himself up with his papers, leaving Helen to explore the neighbourhood on her own account. In her joy over his awaking from a long sleep, she was like a happy child, and the simple folk she met and often talked with, in such German as she possessed, wondered at the sunshine in her face. These were days which Helen Woodgate never forgot; they were, indeed, the happiest she had spent since her marriage, and the letters she wrote home breathed a spirit of contentment and peace, which set her father's sometimes anxious heart at rest. It was an ideal life in many respects—the wonder was that Woodgate suffered it so long. He became absorbed in his story—a mediæval romance he had long had in view, and the object for which he strove and laboured was the approving smile, not of his wife, but of Hilda von Reutensee. He talked but little of the progress of his work to Helen, nor did she trouble him with many questions, though he had no idea of the absorbing, almost feverish nature of her interest. He had long

decided, even when deliberately planning his marriage, that Helen should be a thing apart from the other interests of his life, and he adhered strictly to that determination. Helen saw in his reserve only the natural reticence of a man of genius, to whom his work was too sacred for speech. In these days, when she saw him daily at his desk, turning over page after page of closely-written manuscript, her faith in him, her ambition and hope obtained a new lease of life. After two weeks of this isolated life, in which Helen was left much more alone than was right or kind, she became, for the first time since her marriage, utterly and intolerably home-sick. The simple life of the Francon village, the hard-working, honest, kindly-mannered sons and daughters of toil with whom she came daily in contact, and who had quickly overcome their awe of the English lady who went about so sweetly and so constantly alone among them, awakened in her a painful longing for that other life, as simple and true and unostentatious, which seemed so far away now, so unutterably dear. She hid her heart-hunger well, not by word or look betraying to her husband what was passing in her heart, but many tears fell in the solitudes of the pinewoods, tears which were never permitted to dim her eyes and so vex his spirit. Loving to be occupied, she continued to add new leaves to her sketch-book, which was to be pored over by many loving and wondering eyes, in the quiet dale where Miss Helen's handiwork was regarded almost as a sacred thing.

All the time Helen was not without her natural curiosity regarding the Schloss and its inmates. She had a great desire to behold the boy Gustav, and was disappointed to hear from their hostess that he had gone with the Gräfin to her early home in Thüringen. She took advantage of their absence to explore the Schloss and its environs, and to sketch it from every possible point. It hung high, like an eagle's nest, on the summit of a grey cliff overhanging the farther side of the lake, its square battlements and curious round towers clothed with the grace of green ivy, the kindly and true, which can steal away all harshness and give tenderest beauty to the most rugged outline. The inhabitants of Reutensee regarded the

Schloss with veneration and pride, the Gräfin with reverential love. Helen heard many tales of her goodness, her kindness of heart, her sympathy with all sorrow; also tales of the young Gustav's fearless daring, high spirits, but gentle, loving heart.

She was sitting one afternoon on her favourite bench in the orchard, when an old-fashioned carriage, attended by livery servants, lumbered into the courtyard, and immediately the landlady came flying to the orchard in great excitement.

"It is the Gräfin, madame—she would speak with you. Shall I bring her here to you, now?"

Helen assented at once, with some tremor of excitement, which amused her not a little; she had not been wont to be fluttered by the presence of strangers.

Presently, holding open the orchard-gate with every sign of respect and pleasure, the hostess introduced her distinguished callers to the presence of the English lady, and immediately withdrew. Helen rose, and regarded them with deep interest. The Gräfin was a woman of commanding presence, further enhanced by the extreme heaviness of her mourning garb; her long thick veil was, however, thrown back over her bonnet, and revealed a somewhat stern and heavy-featured face of the purely German type. The lad was very English in his looks, slender, tall, and ruddy, with his mother's fair hair and blue eyes, and as he advanced took his hat off.

"Good-afternoon, madame," said the Gräfin in good English, though with a northern accent. "I returned only to the Schloss yesterday, and hearing from my kinswoman that you were here, we made haste to pay our respects, and to bid you welcome, though late, to Reutensee."

She smiled as she spoke, and all the harshness vanished from her face. Helen took the extended hand and murmured her thanks, while looking at the boy with the liveliest interest.

"This is Gustav, whose mother you know; a good lad, and the joy of Reutensee."

He seemed shy, and blushed a little at the warmth with which the English lady greeted him.

When his aunt sat down on the bench beside Helen, he

walked a little way, surveying the trees, and apparently glad not to be addressed.

"It is indeed kind of you to come," said Helen gratefully. "Will you permit me to call my husband?"

"Nay, not to-day. He is a scholar, a man devoted to his books. I am no longer fit company for such," said the Gräfin, laying a detaining hand on Helen's arm. "I have come to see you, and to ask if you will visit me at the Schloss. I hear from our good Frau Bauer that you have already made acquaintance with its exterior."

Helen blushed.

"I trust I did not intrude. It is so lovely up there, it fascinates me all day long."

"It is a sweet spot. There is none other on earth like it in my eyes, and Gustav is of the same mind," she said, with a glance of extraordinary tenderness towards the boy. "As it is fitting he should be, seeing it is his own heritage. His mother has only been gone a month from us; for your sake I wish she were still here."

She spoke with a kindliness of Hilda which showed Helen that the relations between them were in no way strained. And she marvelled somewhat that two so different should be able to find companionship one with the other. The Gräfin's face bore traces of the deepest grief, her expression was one of habitual melancholy—her whole bearing that of a woman who is done with life. Helen glanced involuntarily at the boy, pitying the young life spent among such strange surroundings. Yet he looked neither unhappy nor dull.

"The boy was so sad of heart when his mother left him, that I had to take him to my own people in Thüringen to uplift him," said the Gräfin, following Helen's glance, and partially comprehending it.

"Is he then so passionately devoted to her?"

"Passionately; he adores her. It is a hard fate that separates them and Graf Ludwig; but this is a family matter, pray excuse me. Will you drink coffee with me to-morrow afternoon at four o'clock?"

"Gladly. I have broken the tenth commandment many times, looking through your old gates," said Helen, with a laugh.

"Had I known you were in Reutensee, I should have given orders for your admittance," said the Gräfin, as she rose. "Come, Gustav; we shall have the pleasure of seeing Mrs. Woodgate at the Schloss to-morrow, then you must show her your books. Her husband is a great scholar, and in his own land a distinguished man. You remember your mother telling us of the English poet?"

"Yes," returned the boy, and his fair face flushed. "Have you seen my mother, madame, since she left Reutensee?"

"No; before she came. Some day I hope you will visit her and us in England," said Helen, moved by the wistfulness of his look.

"When I am a man, if not before. My mother knows I will come when I am a man," he said proudly, and offered his arm with great courtesy to his aunt, whom his words seemed to sadden.

When they were gone, Helen sat idly thinking of the boy, unable to get his sweet face from her thoughts; "*wae*" for him, as they said in the Dale, because he loved his mother so dearly, and could only see her for such a short space. And she felt bitter against a man she had never seen, the author of this needless heartache, Ludwig von Reutensee. Next day, at the appointed hour, Helen climbed the steep path through the odorous pines, and, crossing the old drawbridge, entered the gateway of the courtyard, which reminded her of some quaint pleasaunce of the olden time. A little garden, in which grew some stately poplar trees, made a lovely oasis within the grey old walls, and afforded a delightful shelter from the heat of the May-day sun, which lay drowsily over all. There was no sign of life visible except on one of the stern battlements, where a peacock sunned himself, proudly spreading out his gaudy tail, as if for the stranger's benefit.

A stout man-servant, sitting soberly on an oaken settle in the wide, cool hall, ushered her up at once to the presence of his mistress. Her welcome was most cordial.

"You have a lovely day for your walk. I hope your husband is well, and that he does not marvel at my discourtesy? I see so few strangers. When the Graf himself comes with his friends, I go away to Thüringen always, not being fit company now for those from the outside world."

"My husband is only grateful to you for your kindness to me," said Helen quickly. "He bade me offer his respects and thanks."

The Gräfin inclined her head.

"Coffee waits us, I think, in the other room. When you are rested and refreshed, we can then look at what will interest you in the Schloss."

Helen long remembered that pleasant meal. As they sat together at the little table in a quaint window overlooking the village and the blue Franconian mountains in the distance, little did Helen dream when and how she should revisit the Schloss of Reutensee.

The Gräfin did not talk very much, but rather sought to draw out her guest, till her sympathetic interest, communicating itself to Helen, caused her to talk more than usual about herself.

"A new-made wife," said the Gräfin, with most motherly kindness, "and life all before you! Ah me! I do not know whether to pity or envy you. I too have tasted of your joy. That, see, is the portrait of my husband, Graf Waldemar von Reutensee."

Helen rose, and, crossing the polished floor, stood in silence before the lifelike portrait of a soldier standing by his steed.

"I had forgotten he was a soldier; but in your country all are soldiers."

"They are called by that name, but soldiers, like artists, are born," said the Gräfin, with a slight smile, as she came to Helen's side. "The Reutensees are all soldiers born, and have been," she added gravely. "My Graf fell at Gravelotte. Can you remember that desperate fight? If not, you can read its record still. I read it to my Gustav, faithfully as I read him his Bible, so that he may know, when his time comes, how a hero

falls. At Gravelotte, Waldemar von Reutensee led on his Uhlans to death and victory."

Helen looked at her in simple wonder. Reared in a land where women abhorred the name of war, she could scarcely enter into the fierce exultation, the wild and melancholy pride, which lit up the face of the desolate woman as she told how the hero fell.

"And this is my son." Her voice changed as she moved a few steps and pointed to a small medallion portrait of a handsome boyish face, lit by sparkling eyes, in which the gleam of school-boy laughter seemed yet to linger. "My son Waldemar," she repeated, and the bitterness of her expression indicated that this was the greater sorrow.

"Bereft of both, my heart bleeds for you, Gräfin."

"My first sorrow could be borne, because it had no shame; my husband died as a soldier should, for King and Fatherland. In his memory I am wholly blessed; but the child—the boy upon whom I had built hopes high enough to reach the heavens"—

She came to a sudden stop, and turned her keen eyes with startling scrutiny upon the calm, earnest, sympathetic face of the woman by her side.

"You are a stranger to me, but you are simple and true, as Hilda said. My heart opens to you; you shall hear my sorrow. This boy, the only child God gave to us, grew up in beauty by my side, and I thanked God for him. I was a proud woman in those days, madame, with that pride of happy possession which is the most precarious of all; and when his father died, I said to myself that the spirit of my dead Reutensee lived again in his boy, and that he would be an honour to the name he bore. I let him go, when I dared no longer keep him, to school and college, living in his absence on his letters. So the years sped, till came the last year of his university life, and then he would join the regiment his father loved, and fill that honoured place. So then, my dear, I saw no fault in the boy, though they told me the passionate temper of his race burned fiercely in his heart. If it did, it was never shown to me. I was looking

for his home-coming, counting the days till I should hold him to my heart, when they brought him to me dead—killed in a paltry duel with a peasant's son—and the cause, dear Heaven! that was where it hurt—my son died by the hand of one of the common people, for the sake of a low-born girl who served them with beer at a country inn. So died my husband and his son."

Helen was shocked, awed, silenced by the bitter intensity of the proud woman's grief.

"So they brought me my son, and the other, some mother's son also, no doubt, is shut up in a fortress for life; and that is cruel, since it cannot avenge the dead or satisfy the living. I abide here by the grace of Graf Ludwig, because he knows I cannot live apart from my memories, and the boy Gustav keeps my old heart from withering to the tomb. Say," she added, suddenly laying her hand on Helen's arm, "do you not think the boy's mother a good woman—one with whom any man might have been happy?"

"I do indeed," said Helen fervently, "though I know so little of her."

"I cannot quite make her out at times," said the old woman, with a sigh; "but of this I am sure, she is ten thousand times too good for Graf Ludwig. In my prayers—God forgive!—I ask of Him that the boy may not be influenced by his father, then that the Graf may be changed to a better life."

"Does he not love the boy?" asked Helen, with intense interest.

The Gräfin gave her shoulders an expressive shrug.

"Graf Ludwig loves but one thing in the world, and that is self. He speaks slightly of his wife to the boy, and makes his young blood boil, love of her being the passion of his soul."

"Do you not remonstrate with him?" inquired Helen.

"I do not. Graf Ludwig regards old women as unnecessary evils. He says no woman should be allowed to live after forty. But now I have wearied you. The boy should be home sometimes. He goes to his lessons at our good Pastor Locher's, but next year he must go to school at Erlangen, and I shall be

alone. I am pleased to see you here, madame, and I hope we shall meet again. Do you remain some time at Reutensee?"

"It depends entirely on my husband's work," replied Helen.

"Gustav and I leave home again the day after to-morrow," said the Gräfin. "This morning I received the Empress's commands to meet her at Frankfort. We have not met since the dark days of 1871, when she was graciously pleased to visit me here. How long we shall be absent depends, of course, on her Majesty's pleasure."

"Yet I trust we shall meet again one day," said Helen.

The Gräfin bent forward and kissed her on the lips.

CHAPTER XIV

“There was something of the sea about him,
Something large, generous, and strong.”

IN August, travelling by easy and fitful stages, the Woodgates returned to town, and immediately began that weariness to the flesh and spirit, seeking for a place of abode. They fixed at last upon a roomy old manor house at Hampstead, within three minutes of the Heath—such a house as a poet would love, and any artistic soul find a congenial resting-place. Then was Helen genuinely happy, throwing her whole energies into the task of converting the old house into a home. Woodgate, as was to be expected, left her to do just as she pleased, stipulating only certain things pertaining to his own study, which was on the second floor, and had a long French window opening on a balcony, before which the trees in the garden had been thinned, in order that the view across the Heath might be uninterrupted. Helen was enchanted with everything. Like most country folk, she had imagined London a wilderness of brick and mortar, and was amazed to find so lovely a spot near the beating heart of the great city. While she was busy with such housewifely occupations, Woodgate, having finished the first draft of his book, went to hunt up some of his old friends, such congenial souls as had been wont to haunt the Parthenon and like resorts. He was not astonished to find nobody in town except Har-

greaves, who, erratic in every walk of life, took his holidays when everybody else was at work, and *vice versâ*. He occupied a den of his own in Norfolk Street, and Woodgate found him sitting as he had left him, with his feet on the table, his pipe in his mouth, and a mass of inextricable confusion everywhere.

"You look, Harry, as if you had never moved since I went away," said Woodgate, as he opened the door without ceremony.

The journalist leaped to his feet in a surprise which was uncommonly genuine, though he affected never to be surprised at anything.

"Woodgate, by all that's wonderful! I thought you were dead. Now that I come to think of it, it was Garbutt who died, and you got married. It amounts to the same thing in the end. And how are you?"

"Very well. You are just as of yore. I want to hear about the fellows."

"Gently, gently; I want to hear about you first. You owe it to me, and you're at my mercy, because you know there isn't a soul in town but myself, and you can't afford to offend me," said Hargreaves, with a curious comical contortion of his face. "Mrs. Woodgate, how is she?"

"Quite well too; any more questions to ask?" said Woodgate impatiently. "You always were the most confoundedly inquisitive fellow that drew breath." He cleared a chair with one hand, and sat down on it, a trifle gingerly, glancing round the den, which smelt vilely of stale cigars and musty papers, wondering anew how Hargreaves, who was at heart a gentleman, could support existence in such a place. Woodgate was something of an epicure and a sybarite in his personal tastes.

"I've got something to finish here, Woodgate, for a poor devil of a fellow. I haven't begun to go back on my word yet, though I may come to it. Just hold your tongue for five minutes, and then I'm free."

Woodgate nodded, and for a few minutes only the scratching of the pen, mingled with the medley of noise flowing in through the open window from the busy Strand, was heard. Woodgate

occupied the time in critically regarding Hargreaves, and came to the conclusion that he was rapidly ageing. He was not old in years,—not yet forty,—but his shoulders were stooped and round, his hair grey, his face wan and lined. He had a fine head and a good face; but something lacked, it would be hard to say what. Hargreaves was a man who had missed his mark, and who was now a Bohemian of Bohemians, hating the conventionalities of life with a mortal hatred. But among his own friends he was a prince of good fellows, and the goodness and foolish tenderness of his heart were so evident that he never had a penny in his pocket. He was a man well known in literary circles, a smart writer, and, when he liked, a brilliant talker, but he had never done a piece of solid work in his life, and only wrote so that he might live. He had no kindred that anybody knew of—no ties such as other men have to bind them to life.

“Married a swell, Woodgate, eh?” he said presently, having finished his task and rapidly glancing over it. “Looks like it, you’re so uncommonly smart. Do you think, now, there was any kind of fairness in your treatment of us? I think, if a man is going to do it, he ought to make a clean breast of his weakness first to his friends.”

Woodgate laughed. It was pleasant and refreshing to hear Hargreaves’ lazy banter once more; and his heart warmed to him.

“I want to hear about Garbutt, Harry. You said he was dead. It can’t be true?”

“It is. Garbutt shuffled off in June, just after the Derby. Yes; lost there, goodness knows how much. Couldn’t stand it, so knocked under.”

“Not suicide?” said Woodgate in a startled voice.

Hargreaves nodded.

“Put a bullet through his brain on the Scrubbs on a pouring wet night, and was not found for twenty-four hours after,” said the Bohemian, with a deep shade of regret. “Fine fellow was Garbutt, ought not to have wasted. St. John’s down on his luck too, and gone to a permanent situation to write up

City news for the *Evening Bulletin*, the eighth wonder of the world."

"But, I say, what's become of Garbutt's wife and children? He had a lot of the latter, hadn't he?"

"Six, I believe," said Hargreaves; "and Mrs. G. as good a little soul as ever breathed. They're provided for by our mutual friend, the Countess."

Hargreaves distinctly looked at Woodgate as he said it, and was rewarded by seeing Woodgate's colour rise. Now a blush on the face of Woodgate was not an everyday occurrence, and Hargreaves duly made a note of it.

"Is she in town at present?"

"Not yet, but expected next week, I believe. She sent me her instructions about the Garbutts, and I carried them through. I went only yesterday to Park Lane to inquire after her, and learned that she is coming next week."

A printer's boy appeared at the door at the moment and Hargreaves, pushing his copy into a long envelope, threw it to him, and bade him shut the door. Then he put up his feet again, lit a fresh pipe, and prepared to enjoy a jolly good talk.

"Now I'm ready, Woodgate. So you've gone and done it? What kind of an experiment has it proved, and what changes does it involve? I want to know everything, so here goes: Are you going to live in London?"

"Yes, we have taken a house at Hampstead. I hope you'll come and see us in it, Harry," said Woodgate sincerely, who loved this man, if he could love anybody, and secretly respected his judgment on most subjects.

Hargreaves shook his head, and watched his smoke curling upwards in silence for a full minute.

"I'll make no rash promises. There is only one woman in London who entertains such outcasts as me,—I had almost said us,—and I need not name her, but I'm not above listening to anything you have to say about your wife. Scotch, isn't she?"

"Yes," said Woodgate drily. "I'm not going to say any-

thing about her, so you're out of your reckoning, my dear Harry. If you don't like to come and pay your respects to her—well, you can do the other thing."

"Exactly," said Hargreaves serenely. "Well, now, are you going to do any work on this side of the grave, or is it true that you are played out? I saw those things you sent Davenant from Tyrol, and we came to the conclusion that they were awful rot, and just what we might expect in the circumstances. When will you write another book, man? Everybody is asking the same question?"

"I have written one. I've brought the completed manuscript back with me," said Woodgate, with evident pride.

Hargreaves took down his legs and sat round in his chair, with the liveliest look of interest in his face.

"No, really? If that's the effect matrimony has had, let's all go in for matrimony. St. John might have tried it before this. But he would have said it was a desperate remedy. A new book—phew! We'll have something to talk about for the next three months. Has she seen it?"

"My wife, do you mean?"

"No, the Countess. If Mrs. Woodgate is a critic and a competent judge, I retract all I said about matrimony, and pledge myself to go in for it when everything else fails. By the bye, did you see the Countess abroad? She paid her visit to her son earlier than usual this year."

"Yes; she came to us in Florence."

"And has met your wife?"

"Yes."

Woodgate was uncomfortable under these remarks, and showed it. Hargreaves put up his feet again, and smoked another full minute in silence.

"Wilkes is not out of town," he said presently, completely changing the subject. "Care to see him?"

"I don't mind. What's he after now?"

"Starting a new mag. He's got a new commission just now, to sweep clean the moral atmosphere of London, and the new mag. is to be the vehicle of his thought. Let's go and look

him up. Got editorial chambers in Arundel Street, everything tip-top. Somebody's backing him, but we can't find out who. Awful ass is Wilkes; always was."

He picked himself up, gave his coat a brush, and, taking down a very shabby hat from behind the door, tenderly smoothed its ruffled surface.

"He's taking up the aristocracy—that is, such of them as have been in deep waters lately. Some of them have money, so they'll help him to run the thing. Asked me to write him an article for the first number, and when I asked him to table the £ s. d. first, he was as mad as a March hare, and said I was an old friend and might oblige him. I said old friends had to live; but those are the lines he'll go upon, and he'll make it pay. Let's go up in order that I may have the felicity of hearing him badger you."

"I'd like to know what company I am to appear in first," said Woodgate.

"Mr. Wilkes is a guarantee of respectability—at least, so thinks Wilkes. If there's a fellow in this London I despise, it's Wilkes; he's beneath contempt. He wouldn't contribute a farthing to the Garbutt fund, though he laughed the loudest at poor Garbutt's jokes. He said the man had brains, and had no business to leave his family unprovided for. Come on, man; I'll sit on Wilkes for you if necessary. I only want you to see how the pigmy has got himself swollen up with his new conceit."

He threw open the window, pulled his loose papers back from it, and when Woodgate had passed out, locked the door and put the key in his pocket. They presented a striking contrast as they walked down to the Embankment side by side—Woodgate immaculate in his attire, Hargreaves shabby to the last degree, and with one hand shoved into his trousers' pocket in his usual easy fashion. But there was something about the man at once human and winning; if you had wished to ask a favour of one or other, the probability is you would have taken your first chance with him of the shabby coat and hat.

"There's something I'd like to know, Dick," he said, with a side glance at the clear-cut, handsome face of Woodgate; "and that is, how did the Countess and your wife assort? It's a natural curiosity, but if you consider it cheek, pray say so."

"They assorted very well, so far as I could see," Woodgate returned carelessly. "At least, I believe they vowed friendship, and are hoping to meet in London."

Hargreaves' lips formed a whistle but he did not suffer the sound to escape.

"Do you think really that Mrs. Woodgate would care to behold a vagabond like me?" he said then, as if the thought clung to him.

"You had better come and see. I never pester people to visit me. If they don't care to come, they can stop away. But you have not the least idea what my wife is like."

"That I haven't," said Hargreaves honestly, "and I confess to curiosity. Well, I will gather the rags of my respectability about me one day and look you up. Will Mrs. Woodgate receive on Sundays, do you think?"

"We haven't made any arrangement of that kind yet," said Woodgate; "but I don't think it likely. She is a Scotch clergyman's daughter, Harry."

"Oh, so she is," said Hargreaves. "I doubt she and I won't hit it off, but I'll do my best. I've had a fit of the blues to-day, Dick, and have even got the length of wishing I had started on a different tack. I tell you that affair of Garbutt's brings a fellow on his beam ends. I saw him at the inquest, poor beggar, and it made me think of Hamlet: 'There's more things in heaven and earth than are dreamed of in our philosophy.' Where would you suppose now the soul of Garbutt is at this moment?"

"How should I tell? Been drinking lately, Harry?" said Woodgate, to whom this style of talk was not agreeable, the more so that he had never before heard it from Hargreaves' lips.

"Not more than usual," replied Hargreaves, smiling with his

lips, though his eyes were grave. "So it's at Hampstead you've built your nest? Looks as if you meant to cut poor Grub Street. Will Mrs. Woodgate extend her prejudice against the Parthenon, Dick?"

"Come and see," said Woodgate, and began to talk of Wilkes again as they turned into Arundel Street, and sought the new chambers that bore his name.

CHAPTER XV

"A woman's heart, my son,
A light thing, ah yes!
So light it vibrates
To the slightest touch."



WOODGATE arrived home about five o'clock that afternoon, and found his wife resting a little after the labours of the day. She had first put in order a little morning-room on the ground floor (a snug little chamber, furnished in walnut and yellow damask), having the true housewife's dislike of a confusion so universal that no resting-place was to be found for the sole of her foot. The tea-tray was on the table, and Helen was enjoying the pages of a new magazine, teacup in hand, when he entered.

"Just in time, Richard," she said brightly, for things had gone well with her that day, and order was rapidly being converted out of chaos. "Is it not very hot in town this afternoon?—why, I feel it even here."

"Hot enough," said Woodgate, as he threw himself into a chair. "Everybody is out of town but Hargreaves; but I would rather have seen him than anybody. Have you heard me speak of Hargreaves?"

"No, dear; but you can tell me about him now, if you like," she said, with a smile, as she passed him his cup.

"Queer fellow, Hargreaves," said Woodgate musingly.

"A man who can say the most disagreeable things, yet everybody likes him. He is too thorough a Bohemian, I am afraid, Helen, to commend himself to you."

"What is his occupation?" asked Helen, with interest.

"Faith, you puzzle me. He's a literary man, though he has never written a book; confines himself to pot-boilers, which he publishes anonymously everywhere. Of course, we who know him recognise his work wherever we see it; a man of good parts, but absolutely without ambition."

"Are there many such in London, Richard?" Helen asked, with a covert touch of anxiety; for if it were the prevailing characteristic of the set in which her husband moved, what hope could there be for him?

"A few," he replied, evidently thinking yet of the strange mood in which he had left Hargreaves. "And I question if they are not to be envied after all. There are plenty of the other sort too; and you will find the literary life a choice exemplification of all envy, malice, and uncharitableness."

"I hope you are only teasing me, Richard. I should not like to believe that. Why should one be jealous of another—is there not room and welcome for all?"

"Your simplicity, my love, is truly refreshing—Hargreaves would enjoy it," he said lightly. "I heard of the Countess from him, Helen; she returns to Park Lane next week."

"Is Mr. Hargreaves also a friend of hers?"

"He is; he thinks her the only woman worth talking to in London. I am glad she will return so soon, as I don't want to do anything with my manuscript till she has seen it; and this is the twenty-eighth of August."

A curious expression, half envy, half bitterness, crossed his wife's face as he spoke, but he did not observe it.

"Where is she just now?" she asked, striving to speak without restraint.

"Hargreaves did not say, but probably in Scotland. She goes there generally in August. But now, come; tell me what you have been about all day. When is the drawing-room likely to be ready?—we shall have to begin and receive very soon."

"Next Tuesday, they definitely promise everything to be in its place," replied Helen, nothing loth to turn the talk to themes in which she was for the moment absorbingly interested. "I think the servants are going to do very well; they are both willing and obliging."

"For these and all other mercies," said Woodgate fervently; "I'll take another cup. We shall want some pictures, shan't we, Helen? I know a poor little woman who thinks she can paint; we might buy something from her. It would be a charity, because she has just been left a widow with six children."

Helen was interested at once, and asked many questions, he replying judiciously, only telling what he thought fit concerning the affairs of poor little Mrs. Garbutt. Helen would have been shocked at the tale, and would probably have blamed Garbutt more than he deserved; so reasoned Woodgate, misjudging her entirely.

He spent the next few days revising his manuscript, and Helen, seeing him so concerned over it, rejoiced in her soul and took courage. She had gone into town one morning, leaving him thus engaged, when about noon a very smart victoria was driven up the short approach to the house. Woodgate, hearing the wheels, looked out, and immediately came downstairs in time to hear the maid tell the Countess her mistress was out.

"Ah, there is Mr. Woodgate," said the Countess. "Good-morning. Welcome back to London. I came to see your wife to-day, not you. Hargreaves told me where you were to be found, and I came early, making sure to find her at home."

"She is haunting the groves of Tottenham Court Road just now, and will, I expect, till our domicile is in order. But you will put up your horse and wait? She will be back to lunch at two."

"Not to-day. May I congratulate you on your choice of a house? It is lovely. Your choice, or your wife's, may I ask?"

"We agreed upon it. Will you not at least step in and view the interior?"

"Not in Mrs. Woodgate's absence. I know what a woman

is; she will wish to do the honours of her house herself," she said, feeling annoyed, though she would not notice it, at the expression on Woodgate's face as he leaned on the side of the carriage and looked at her, making no effort to hide his gladness.

Time was when his adoration had not been unwelcome to her, though she had never allowed it to overstep the bounds; but now it was an insult and an injury to her and to his wife. But she was too much a woman of the world to suffer her deep annoyance to exhibit itself.

"Well, so you did go to Reutensee after all, and Mrs. Woodgate made a double conquest. My boy writes of her with an enthusiasm which might belong to him ten years hence, and the Gräfin was equally charmed. Did you do any work?"

"The thing is finished. I am only waiting for your verdict, before sending it to Davenant."

She lowered her sunshade a trifle, but far enough to hide her face at the moment.

"I call that most absurd," she said quickly. "Has your wife read it?"

"No, she has not. I don't think she has sufficient interest in the thing to take the trouble," he said carelessly.

Down went the sunshade to the farther side, while she leaned forward, her fair face wearing a look of undisguised eagerness.

"Richard, believe me, you are making the most profound of all mistakes; treating your wife as if she were a doll or a baby. Is it possible that you, who make your study of your kind your boast, have failed to grasp the depth and sincerity and nobility of her character? You must allow her to share your life, or you will live to regret it."

He cast his eyes on the ground, and kicked the pebbles from under his foot with the air of a spoiled child.

"I think you take an exaggerated view of the case," he said, at length. "I have known my wife for fifteen years, and I assure you she is a housewife; one of the sweetest and most womanly of women, if you like, but nothing more."

"You are mistaken, Richard," she repeated. "Time will prove that I am right."

"The conflict is really only about to begin," he observed then. "She is good and sweet-tempered, but her prejudices are unusually strong, and she will not lay them aside without a struggle."

"If you knew all that, why in heaven's name did you marry her?" asked the Countess, with a touch of passion.

He gave his shoulders a little shrug; he could very well have told her, but there were some things he did not dare to say.

"I wanted to be settled," he replied evasively. "But to go back to what is of more immediate importance—when can I bring my book to you?"

She took out her tablets and ran her eye over her engagements. "I have a lunch to-morrow, but I shall be home at four. Come to me then, and bring Mrs. Woodgate with you. Ask her to accept this call, and to give me a couple of hours to-morrow from her housewifely engagements."

"Thank you," he said. "To-morrow, at four. I saw Hargreaves yesterday. Sad affair of Garbutt's, is it not?"

"Very. I must interest Mrs. Woodgate in Mrs. Garbutt; she is a plucky little woman. Well, good-day!"

She gave him only the tips of her fingers, smiled but coldly, and bade the coachman drive on. Her face as she drove down the hill from the Manor House wore a troubled look. She felt angry, impatient with Woodgate, and wondered anew over his marriage. Also she thought much and tenderly of Helen, and regretted that she had ever admitted Woodgate to such close friendship, seeing he did not seem to know its limit. She thought of Hargreaves, who came and went as he pleased to Park Lane, bringing with him all sorts and conditions for her sympathy and aid, and yet preserving through it all the simple good fellowship which, when genuine, is so pleasant and gives so little trouble. Hargreaves was not handsome, and made no pretensions to genius, but he was a good, plain, honest soul, whom it was a pleasure to meet in any circumstances or mood. Though by no means a morbid or gloomy person, Hilda von Reutensee, looking ahead, saw trouble, and it lay heavy on her soul. Perhaps it might yet be necessary for her to break

entirely with the Woodgates, and yet when she thought of Helen that seemed hard. She tried to banish these haunting thoughts, and returned to her planning for the Garbutts, her sympathy being nothing if not practical. Next day Woodgate kept the engagement at Park Lane alone, making an excuse to the Countess which was a deliberate falsehood, seeing he had never delivered her message. Helen saw him go with a faint pang at her heart, and, being left alone, could not settle to her occupations. She knew, of course, his destination and his errand, and felt the pain of a wounded spirit left out in the cold. She did not resent the Countess's ability and right to advise him as she had done heretofore; nor was she jealous of her in the ordinary sense of the word; but it hurt her keenly that her husband seemed so determined to keep her on the outside so far as his work was concerned. Her dream had been so different. She had pictured herself sharing his every aspiration, rejoicing in his success, and sympathising with him to the full when he seemed to have fallen short; and, instead, she found herself relegated to the post of housekeeper, tenderly and considerately cared for, it is true, and gently treated always; but it was not enough. Hilda von Reutensee had read her correctly in that first hour of their acquaintance; and after eight months of married life Woodgate knew nothing of his wife's inner life,—his own fault entirely, though it is also true that Helen was too reticently proud. A confidence not invited, or at least encouraged, she would never give.

He returned late for dinner, and Helen saw at once from his face that he was out of sorts; but she made no remark, feeling that it was his part to tell her of the interview and its result. They talked of commonplace things while the servant waited on them; when they were left alone, Woodgate alluded, for the first time, to the incidents of the afternoon.

"The Countess seemed frightfully disappointed that you did not come, Helen, and I think that made her short with me."

"How could she be disappointed when she did not ask me, Richard?" said Helen quickly.

"Oh, well, she did say something about your coming yester-

day, but as I knew you were very busy, and she did not seem pressing, I said nothing about it."

"I was not so busy that I could not have spared an hour or two to accompany you," said Helen quietly. "But that is neither here nor there. Tell me what she said about your book."

"She is a very severe critic, but I arrived at an inopportune moment. She had been bored by a stupid luncheon-party, and she seemed annoyed at your absence."

Helen perceived that his vanity had been wounded by the Countess's reception of his work.

"She is more fortunate than I," she said, with a sigh. "Shall I never be privileged to look at your work, Richard, until it has become common property?"

He winced slightly at this direct question.

"I did not know you took so much interest in the thing, Helen," he replied. "My study and my desk are open to you at all times. I keep nothing under lock and key."

"That is permission, dear, not invitation," she said shrewdly. "But I will bide my time; only I don't think it kind of you to say you did not know I was interested. You have shut me out of your life very soon."

"Dearest," he said in his most caressing voice, "don't you understand that a man can't always share his inmost thought with those dearest to him? It is easier to talk with strangers."

"You are going round about the point," she said, with a slight smile. "Let me come directly to it. Is it not the case that you do not think me capable of appreciating your work? I do not lay claim to any special ability, but don't set me aside without a trial."

Woodgate, now slightly ruffled, ran his long fingers impatiently through his hair.

"Helen, upon my word, I don't know how we shall get on if this is to be the way of it. Try to understand how long I have been accustomed to a solitary life, doing my work without let or hindrance, consulting nobody's convenience but my own. I trust I shall never be selfish; but you, also, must give me time to become accustomed to the new order of things."

"I trust I shall not be selfish either, Richard," she said, with that touch of wistfulness which always disarmed him. "Don't be angry with me. I wish to be so much, and I seem to be so little."

"My love, you are perfect. I have always thought so, and think so still. But you know my views about what a wife should be to a man—a haven of refuge to which he flies to escape all the outside worry. How can he escape if she insists on dragging said worries within the inner doors of the sanctuary?"

It was a fine theory, which Helen immediately demolished in her calmest and most deliberate fashion.

"How can a wife be what you say if she does not share the worries? She can give no sympathy; she is really ignorant of her husband's inmost mind, and therefore can never come very near him. I can't agree with you there at all, Richard."

Looking at her, Woodgate was struck at the moment by the strength of her face rather than its sweetness. It was indeed as the Countess had said—she was no child; the calm, judicial, deliberate character of the woman was marked in every lineament. No, Helen was not pliable. He had been mistaken in her. She would never bend just as he willed.

"Business men, dear, are privileged to leave their cares in the City. May I not leave mine upstairs? It is that I ask from you, my darling, sympathy without questioning, a love on which I can lean without having to still its continued exactions, sometimes its upbraidings."

He came to her side, and, taking her face in his hands, kissed it with something of a lover's fondness. She clung to him falteringly, and when she spoke, her voice was tremulous.

"I shall try to be what you wish. It is my desire and prayer to be a true wife to you in all things—to help you as I can. But, Richard, don't go to others for what I so long to give you—sympathy in your work. Nobody will ever be as ambitious for you, or believe in you so thoroughly, as your own wife."

He kissed her again, smiling at what he called her foolish words. The day came when they recurred to him with all the bitter sting of an unavailing regret.

CHAPTER XVI

“A heart at leisure from itself,
To soothe and sympathise.”



HERE were many things in Helen Woodgate's new life to puzzle and concern her ; one of these was her husband's utter disregard of the Sabbath, which in the country manse is the day of days. She had not felt it so seriously abroad, where everything differs from home customs, but when settled in their own house, and she found that he declined to breakfast before noon on Sundays, she did not know what course to pursue. At first she thought it her duty to remain at home from morning church to breakfast with him ; but, after a time, finding that the evenings were often broken in upon by chance callers, she breakfasted and went to morning service alone, sometimes with a sad heart. The people who dropped in on Sunday evenings after a stroll on the Heath did not commend themselves to her somewhat fastidious tastes. They seemed to be City men engaged in literary and journalistic work, and their talk at such times, as Helen heard it, somewhat opened her eyes. She had often in her imagination pictured "the feast of reason and the flow of soul" she would be permitted to hear, if not to share ; the reality was far different. They seemed to talk gossip chiefly, and not very kindly gossip either, of their fellow-craftsmen, and appeared to be more interested in the financial side of their profession than any other. They

were exceedingly deferential to Woodgate, who, being a rich man, and having won a certain reputation, was worth cultivating. This was the conclusion Helen was forced to arrive at concerning those men, who she saw could not have an elevating influence upon her husband. These things were real trials of soul and conscience to Woodgate's wife, but she kept silence regarding them, waiting until she should have the knowledge of experience, and then speak with authority. Hargreaves never came, and at the end of September Helen had not yet met him. All these weeks she had seen very little indeed of the Countess; and, Woodgate being busy with his proofs and having many engagements in the City, she was left a great deal alone. The Manor was now in order, a beautiful, orderly, and tasteful home, in which Helen took a natural interest and pride. But you cannot fill up your days gazing upon furniture, or even shifting it about, therefore time soon began to hang heavily on her hands. It was in every respect a stupendous change for her. In Broadrule her duties, social and parochial, had been so multifarious that she had not known an unoccupied moment; here she was at a loss to fill up the time. She knew no one, and on her own account had no chance callers, seeing London people do not call on strangers, and such friends as her husband possessed, other than the Bohemians aforesaid, had not yet returned to town.

September was a perfect month in London, mellow, sunshiny, and lovely, with sunsets to dream of, and long delicious evenings when it seemed a shame to remain indoors. Helen enjoyed her garden, which she tended with a faithful care, which well repaid her. She was busy among her flowers in the wide old jasmined porch one afternoon when she heard the roll of wheels, and presently saw the Countess's carriage approaching. She dropped her basket and scissors, and ran to meet it, pleased and happy as a child. Hilda von Reutensee observed the flush on her cheek, the sparkle in her eye, and felt her welcome to be sweet.

"Oh, it is so long since you were here, since I have talked with anybody! You can't possibly have any idea

what it is to me to see you. I hope you have come to stay."

"I come really to take you away, if you will come. I knew you were alone, because I saw your husband in town. Will you come for a drive, and take tea with me afterwards?"

"Indeed I will—I do not go out much; and sometimes the days are long. Will you come in while I dress? I shall not be ten minutes."

"No; I shall wait here and admire your lovely belongings," said the Countess, with a nod; and when Helen ran into the house she repeated the words to herself: "I do not go out much, and sometimes the days are long"; adding with bitterness, "Oh, what a fool the man is! how wilfully blind!"

Her face wore a disturbed look. She was thinking of the innumerable times Woodgate had pleaded excuses for his wife, saying she was so absorbed in housewifely cares that she had no thought or desire for anything else.

"He has deceived me, and I never will believe him again," she said to herself, with a rather angry pressure of the lips. "And she deserves a better fate."

Her face was still grave to sternness when Helen came out of the door drawing on her gloves. The little excitement of the moment had given her a brilliant colour, but the Countess noticed that she was thinner and a trifle older-looking than when they had last met in Florence.

"I am afraid you have been moping too much at home lately. Mrs. Woodgate," she said gently, as Helen stepped to her place beside her, "do you think it wise to make such a Hausfrau of yourself altogether?"

"No, I don't, and I have never been used to it," replied Helen frankly. "Now that we are quite settled, I really do not know what to do with myself. Nobody comes to see me, and Richard is so busy just now, he has no time to take me out, therefore I find London incomparably more dull than the Dale was in the depth of winter. But we were never dull in Breadrule."

The Countess looked with keen interest at the sweet, strong

outline of her companion's face, and in her eyes dwelt some of the bitterness she felt against the man who fulfilled so poorly his obligations to the woman he had taken from the happiest of homes, and who had given up everything for him.

"You are so good to come for me," said Helen suddenly with sparkling eyes, as the fleet horses trotted rapidly down the hill, and the sweet cool September wind blew freshly upon them. "Excuse me, I cannot contain my pleasure; it is so delightful to drive, and I was so used to it at home."

"I blame myself very much. I shall see that you have more outings," said the Countess quickly.

"Oh, but I must not tax my friends!" said Helen brightly. "Of course, I did not often ride so finely as this, except sometimes with my sister in her family coach. I had a little cart of my own, and a Norwegian pony, and I drove papa everywhere. You would laugh at the turn-out, Countess; but I loved Tommy, he was so willing and so good."

"I have seen him," said the Countess, with a little smile. "He is a pretty creature, and runs like a hare."

"You have seen him?" cried Helen, turning round to look at her companion in blank surprise. "Seen Tommy!—where?"

"In your dear Dale," nodded the Countess. "Yes; I am in earnest. You forget I have only recently returned from Scotland on my way south. What more easy than to drop off at your Border town for a night, to get a peep at your Dale?"

"But why—why should you do that?" inquired Helen in a bewildered voice.

The Countess laid a hand on hers, and looked straight into her eyes. "I did not quite understand you, and I thought if I could see your old home, it might help me, and it has."

"Oh, tell me how it looked," cried Helen; then, with all her heart in her eyes, "Was it not lovely with the autumn tints in the woods, and the heather purple on the hills? Did you call at the manse?"

"I was not so bold; but I had the good fortune to see your father, who was in the little cart when we met it. My coach-

man, hired from the George Hotel, told me who he was, and did not fail to tell me, too, about his daughter who had gone to London. But I think I should have known him by his resemblance to you, and he is one of the handsomest men I have ever seen."

Helen did not speak for a moment. The Countess saw that she was forgotten, and envied the woman by her side her happy memories.

"To think you should have seen the Dale!" said Helen at length, and her eyes still shone; "and to think I have seen you three times, and you have never mentioned it to me."

"I waited a favourable opportunity, my dear," said the Countess quietly. "And now, to return to the prose of common life,—I see the Dale is your poetry, Mrs. Woodgate,—I have read every word of *Brunehilde*."

In a moment Helen's interest became breathless. "Have you? I have not seen it. My husband says you are a severe critic, though he told me nothing you said."

"He does not like a frank opinion, Mrs. Woodgate, unless it be favourable; but I must be honest, or silent. *Brunehilde* is a beautiful story; it has many tender and fine passages, but it lacks what"—

Helen was silent, fearing to ask a single question.

"A foolish boy once told me I was beautiful, but had no soul. In that I resemble the book we are speaking of—it lacks soul; though we call it by another name, because it sounds better—the spark of genius."

"And is that your opinion, Countess?"

"It is. Of course, I am only one person, and I have never set myself up to be a judge. But I do know what is likely to touch people's hearts, and obtain a permanent hold. When you read the book, and compare it with the other, you will know what I mean. I do not know why you have not read it already. It makes me angry, my dear."

"It need not—the explanation is quite simple," said Helen calmly, yet with a little timid touch. "My husband does not wish to bring all the worries of his work into his home, and if

I am to be of any use or comfort to him, I must respect that wish."

"To a certain extent," replied the Countess, with distinct dryness. "But don't sink your individuality too much; leave that to more colourless wives. Had I been in your place, I should have read every word of the thing long ago, if I had to break into lockfast places to accomplish it."

Helen looked scared. "Oh, I should never do that; I am too proud to steal what is not willingly given," she said quietly. "How beautiful the Park is to-day. Look at that spreading tree, is it not a picture? I am very much obliged to you, Countess, for giving me this rare pleasure."

The Countess smiled broadly, amused at the change in the subject, which she accepted as a sign that her companion had had enough of it. They were now in Regent's Park, which was looking lovely, recent rain having washed all the dust from the trees, so that the autumn tints were shorn of none of their glory.

"I have my reward in your pleasure," the Countess replied gracefully. "And now it is the question — What about Reutensee? Is my son not a pretty boy?"

"He is more—he is a manly one," replied Helen warmly.

"Do you think him like me?"

"Very; and how he loves you! It is hard, bitterly hard, that you should be parted," cried Helen, with keen sympathy.

Hilda von Reutensee's eyes suddenly overflowed. "Don't you make a baby of me, and it is my creed to bear the inevitable philosophically. We shall not be parted for ever, thank God! When the boy has right of choice, he will come to me: till then I must have patience. And my kinswoman, you liked her, I think, and you have won her heart. Tell me—did she speak of me at all?"

"Yes; and most kindly. Why will you always speak as if you were a hard woman of the world, instead of one of the most womanly?"

"Do you think that of me?" said the Countess, with an indescribable and lovely look. "God bless you for it! I have

so few friends, the thought that I may find one in you is very sweet."

"You have few friends?" repeated Helen in surprise. "You live so good and pure and useful a life, anyone might be proud to know you. I am sure many are."

"I know many people," said the Countess, "and some seek me for their own ends. The few friends I possess are those to whom I have been able, out of Reutensee's money, to render some little service, and who are grateful to me. I have found many true hearts among the poor, but I have not one in the whole world who knows the real woman, or believes in me for myself!"

"Oh, Countess, surely you speak wide of the mark."

"No, I don't. I was thinking of women when I spoke, though I *have* one or two tried friends of the other sex who would stand by me, I believe. Have you met Hargreaves yet?"

"Not yet. Richard said he was coming to the Manor, but I have not seen him yet."

"You will like him, I feel sure; but I shall say nothing till you have seen him. By the bye, I have resumed my Sunday evenings; will you make your husband bring you next Sunday,"

"Your Sunday evenings—what are they?"

"I am at home from eight to eleven two Sundays in the month."

"I should like to come for some reasons, but I wish to keep my Sundays as I did at home, Countess," replied Helen frankly.

"I have heard about the Scotch Sundays; but you will not be able to do it here. Sunday engagements will force themselves upon you, and I see no great harm in it myself."

"There are six days in each week. Why choose Sunday?"

"Because it is the only day working people allow themselves a little leisure. I do not receive fashionable people; perhaps because they do not countenance me," said the Countess, a trifle bitterly. "It is my duty to tell you, that in allowing me to call upon you, you are not commending yourself to the British matron, who will probably warn you against me."

"I care nothing at all about that," replied Helen warmly.

"I wondered a little when my husband told me you lived apart from your husband; but now I understand, and admire you for it."

"I might divorce him and marry again, then I could re-enter society," said the Countess, with a smile Helen did not like; "but that I shall never do. So long as I am alive, Ludwig shall never have the chance of marrying another woman, to render her as miserable as he rendered me."

"I think you are right. I admire you for it," repeated Helen warmly, as before.

The carriage was now rolling through the throng of Oxford Street, but the Countess, appearing to have forgotten her surroundings, now leaned forward, looking at Helen with a long, yearning, searching look.

"Then you will be my friend—will permit me to call you by that name?" she said, with a strange emotion.

"I will, indeed. I like you very much," said Helen simply, as a child.

"I thank you. I shall never forget it. I have no woman friend. I shall try to make myself worthy of you. Because you have given me this boon so freely, I will watch over you and be true to you to my dying day."

CHAPTER XVII

“Having a good conscience.”—1 PET. iii. 16.

T was almost dinner-time when Helen returned to Hampstead, being driven home in the Countess's carriage.

“So you have been pleasure-seeking in my absence,” said Woodgate gaily, being in good spirits over Davenant the publisher's opinion of his book. “The Countess is very sly; she never breathed her intention to me when I saw her in Davenant's office this afternoon.”

“She is very kind, I think,” replied Helen quickly. “Was she at Davenant's on your account, Richard?”

“No, my dear. She is good enough to take some slight interest in my literary concerns, but I don't make an idiot of myself,” he replied. “The meeting was purely accidental, she happening to call on Davenant on some business pertaining to one of her innumerable poor protégés. By the bye, will you go to her At Home next Sunday?”

“No, Richard; she does not expect me.”

“And why will you not?”

“Why, dear, you must know I prefer to keep my Sundays as I have been accustomed, though it is not always easy. But it was among my last promises to papa that I should allow nothing to break in upon the sacredness of that day. He asked it most specially, and said, what I see now is very true, that, if

once lost, the regard for Sunday as the Lord's day can never be restored."

Woodgate unfortunately allowed himself to smile, which hurt his wife a good deal more than his words, though they were pronounced enough.

"Didn't we agree, Helen, that the cloak of such observances should be left over the Border? We didn't? Well, we'd better agree now. If you examine or exercise yourself, as they say in the Dale, you'll find that you don't feel a whit holier on Sunday than any other day in the week. What is the use of pandering so slavishly to the imagination?"

"It is not imagination with me, but a matter of simple choice," said Helen, as she deftly smoothed the braids of her abundant hair. "I have quite made up my mind that I shall never receive in the full sense of the word on Sundays myself, or go to the houses of those who do."

The calm decision with which she spoke rather irritated him.

"It is not always a wise or graceful policy to obtrude one's opinions so decidedly, Helen. Your father assured me, on a certain evening you and I have not forgotten, that you possessed in a remarkable degree the capability of adapting yourself to circumstances. But I begin to doubt it."

"Have I then shown myself so deficient?" she asked quickly. "There have been times when I fancied I adapted myself too easily. We live a very careless, I had almost said a godless life, Richard, which often concerns me deeply. I would not wish to draw comparisons, but it is a great change to me, dear, a very great change indeed."

It was the first time she had really uttered her thoughts on the subject, and the deep feeling which prompted her words caused the rich colour to leap to her cheek, but it faded in a moment, leaving her quite pale. Woodgate observed the swift fluctuation of colour, always a sign of extreme nervousness, and it also occurred to him that his wife looked much less fresh and well than when they came first to London. He had not given her that passionate, adoring love which is constant in

its solicitude, but she was in a manner dear to him, and it was impossible for him to be actively neglectful or unkind.

"My dear love," he said, almost tenderly, "I am looking at you, and I feel concerned. Are you quite well?"

"What makes you ask?" she inquired, turning to look at him in surprise.

"Because you do not look it. Would you like, my dear, to take a little run to Scotland before Christmas?"

To his extreme surprise and discomfiture, she burst into tears. In a moment he was at her side, with his arm round her, soothing her with many tender words. They were not the first tears she had shed since her marriage-day, only the first he had been permitted to see.

"Richard, how childish of me!" she cried in self-reproach. "Pray forgive me. I do not know what made me all in a moment so foolish."

"No excuse is necessary, my love. All women weep more or less, and I am rather glad than otherwise to find that you are not exempt from the common weakness," he said, with the utmost kindness; "but I think you might have told me ere this that you were homesick, and I should have taken or sent you to the Dale at once. You see, I know nothing of that malady myself, and I can't be expected to see its signs in others."

"I have not been so very homesick," she said; "only once or twice when it has come home to me that London is a very large and a very desolate place."

It was a somewhat sad confession for a nine months' wife to make, and it touched Woodgate inexpressibly.

"I have been thoughtless, my Helen, thoughtless and selfish," he said, in haste to make amends; "but you will forgive me, I know, because it is a change for me to have another life to consider besides my own. We shall go together to Broadrule next week, pay them a flying surprise visit, then your sister can return with us."

Helen shook her head.

"I had a letter from Annie after you had gone to-day.

She will not be able to come this year, as they expect another baby at Broadyards. And will you really take me next week?" she asked, and her eyes shone. "Oh, you have made me happy, and thank you very much."

"Have I then so poorly compensated you for what you left at Broadrule?" he asked jealously.

"Oh no, I have never regretted it. You have given me a great deal," she cried impulsively; "only it is so different from the old, you must not be impatient with me, Richard, because I have so many little battles to fight, and find it so hard to distinguish between right and wrong."

"Don't try; life is too short for such a conflict," he said easily. "Take my advice, and accept things as they are. It will be happier and better for us both. Your Scotch exercising is a very unprofitable and uncomfortable occupation, which I would advise you to abjure."

"But, Richard, sometimes one has to think and to decide. It is quite impossible always to drift with the tide, impossible and wrong. Don't you remember how Paul bids us fight the good fight?"

Woodgate elevated his brows and shrugged his shoulders, signs which Helen was beginning to understand.

"My dear love, nobody quotes Paul in these degenerate days. He is quite obsolete. I know my generation better than you, though I grant I am not so good; and my advice to you is to accept the philosophy which bids us to-day eat, drink, and be merry, for to-morrow we die."

"Richard, you don't believe that is all?" cried Helen, with a shudder; "that responsible beings have no higher destiny than that? Now I know why you can write nothing like your first book. You have lost the anchor of faith."

"Not I. I believe certain things, as I always have done," he replied lightly. "But a truce to such dismal reasoning. What about the Countess's At Home? You will meet a great many interesting people there, and many who are most anxious to see you."

"I will think it over, Richard; but I do not think the

Countess will be much disappointed or surprised, she knows my views about Sunday entertainments."

"You like her, then, Helen, as well as you did in Florence?" he said anxiously.

"Better, much better. I think she is truly good, and there is no doubt that she is charming. I am sorry for her too; she has led such a hard life."

Woodgate looked gratified, and the subject dropped.

That night Helen took serious counsel with herself, reviewing her position in the calmest and most judicial manner. She saw quite clearly that nothing was to be gained by acting in direct opposition to her husband's wishes, and that she was much more likely to influence him by complying to a certain extent. Had Mr. Lockhart but known with what intense longing Helen went back upon every word he had uttered regarding a Christian's duty; how she pondered upon his example and his teaching, taking courage and strength and guiding from them now, as she had never done in the old days when she dwelt beneath their benign influence,—he must have been moved to the depths. It was a very crucial period in the history of Helen Woodgate—this conflict between what existed and what she wished could exist. She was forced to admit that her husband was of all men the most worldly, the least concerned with what pertained to the higher life. Her clear eyes, which never shrank from beholding the truth in all its bareness, however painful, saw that even his literary ambition was a poor thing, an empty desire to rank higher than his fellows, to hear his own praises sounding loudly in the world's mouth; of the higher aim, the nobler ambition, to use his gifts for God's glory and the good of his fellow-men, he knew little and cared less. It must not be supposed that this admission cost her faithful heart nothing; nay, it was a shock which for a time robbed life of its sweetness, and set on her brow the seal of a great sadness, which never wholly left it until many years had gone, and grave sorrows had put even that lost ideal in the background. The sentence of her father recurred to her most vividly, and seemed, when in her extremity, when

she was fighting out this, for her, great matter of conscience alone, to convey a direct message: "Perhaps God may have a great work for you to do in a new sphere."

It might be, she told herself, that, in quiet ways as yet undreamed of, she might be privileged to hold the cup of cold water to the lips of some thirsty soul, though in the doing her own heart might be riven. It was a thought to kindle the heart and give to life a new aspect. After much counsel and many prayers, her decision was taken, and Woodgate was surprised when she told him next day she was quite willing to accept the Countess's invitation for the Sunday evening.

"I felt sure that when you thought about it, dear, you would take the sensible course," he said, looking much gratified. "You will find that nothing is ever gained by setting up to be better than your neighbours. Eccentricity never pays. I am sure you will enjoy yourself, and of course I shall be very proud to show off my wife, who can look and act so charmingly when she likes. What will you wear?"

"I have not settled that weighty question yet, Richard, but I shall try to please you," she said, with a smile; and he went off to the City in high good humour, telling himself that he was managing his wife very well after all.

The Countess's house in Park Lane was undoubtedly the home of a highly cultivated and refined taste. If to Helen's somewhat conventional eye the statuary gleaming among the tall palms in the hall and staircase, the rich Eastern draperies about the doorways, seemed a trifle fantastic, there was no doubt about their beauty. The double drawing-room was so arranged that many little groups could find quiet corners; nothing so offended the Countess as a great crowd indiscriminately huddled together, as at many social gatherings, without any provision attempted for their comfort or enjoyment. Numbers, so dear to the heart of the fashionable entertainer, possessed no attraction for her. She possessed in a high degree the many attributes which go to make up the successful hostess, and never in her rooms were discordant or opposing elements to be found.

She was one of the few women who, in happier circumstances, might, had she so willed it, have founded a *salon*. Woodgate had not been far astray in his description of the Countess's guests. At first sight they indeed appeared to Helen a motley crew. She was receiving just within the door of the outer room, wearing a rich gown of amber satin, with a daring touch of scarlet in the bodice. Helen thought she looked like a queen. Her face brightened with surprise and pleasure as the Woodgates appeared within the *portière*, and the warmth of her greeting, especially to Helen, was very marked.

"How good of you to come, how very good!" she whispered, as she pressed her hand. "I thank you very much. I know it is a concession of opinion by which I am honoured. I thank you very much."

She was perfectly sincere, but Helen blushed under the unusual warmth of her words; and seeing she seemed a trifle nervous and embarrassed, the Countess took her at once to a quiet corner, and bade her grow accustomed to her surroundings, and she would come to her by and by.

Helen gratefully nodded, and, leaning back in her chair, glanced leisurely round the room. There were about thirty persons present; a fair proportion of both sexes. One or two gentlemen Helen recognised, having seen them in her own house, but the ladies were all strangers. Had she been disposed to criticise, she might with perfect truth have characterised the appearance of the latter as dowdy in the extreme. But there were many interesting and striking faces, though Helen was struck by the prevailing expressions of anxiety and furtive care which seemed marked in a greater or less degree in every face.

"I have been watching you, my dear, and I see you are puzzling over my guests," said the Countess, coming by and by to her side. "You of the large heart and the womanly soul should be interested in every one of them. These are the men and women, but especially the women, to whom life means perpetual strife. And the saddest thing of all is, that they are not likely ever to get beyond the fighting stage. Do you feel sufficiently interested to allow me to make some presentations to you?"

"How can you ask? I have never been so intensely interested," replied Helen quickly, and her eyes were luminous as she spoke. "Is the one of whom you told me at Florence here to-night?"

"He will come, I hope," said the Countess, with a nod. "But he plays the organ in a City church, and it is late always before he is free. I am glad you are not angry that I have invited you here, though I have not asked to meet you any whom the world delights to honour. One or two are here —yourselves; and see yonder, by the standard lamp, talking to the little woman in grey, is Waldron, the landscape painter. I must introduce you to them both, but she is the more interesting. Failures always interest me, just as tragedy appeals more to me than comedy; it is not so commonplace. Oh, that poor little woman! She is a story-writer, Helen, turning them out at the rate of four thousand words a day all the year round; and such poor little stories! Yes, she will interest you; and now I will bring her to you, for you must not be allowed to hide that lovely light of yours under a bushel here."

CHAPTER XVIII

"Hath in her heart wide room
For all that be."

ERY shortly the Countess returned with the little woman in grey, whom she briefly introduced as Miss Ryder, and with a few laughing words took herself again away. She knew very well what she was doing, and that in less than five minutes Helen's sympathy and interest would be fully roused. Miss Ryder was past middle life, a little, spare, harassed-looking creature, with a thin weary face, and restless black eyes, which, in the moment of introduction, wandered keenly and critically over every detail of Helen's appearance. Apparently this frank inspection was satisfactory, for she seated herself contentedly by her side.

"Isn't it very pleasant to spend an evening here?" she began confidentially, "I always tell the Countess it is like a draught of generous wine to me, and sends me to my work with a better heart."

Helen was quick to observe how the restless eyes grew large and luminous as they travelled in the direction of the Countess, and remembering her words, "Some are grateful to me," began to understand. "It is very pleasant, I think," she gently assented; "but I have never been here before."

"Oh, have you not? then perhaps you would like to be told about the people," said Miss Ryder vivaciously. "I know the most of them. Did you observe the gentleman to whom I was

speaking when the Countess came to me? That was Waldron, the painter; you have heard of him. His picture, 'The Last Appeal,' was the picture of the Academy this year."

"I have the honour to know him a little," replied Helen. "Two years ago he came to paint a portrait in the neighbourhood of my old home, and I had the pleasure of dining with him at the house of a friend."

"He is as good as he is great," said Miss Ryder warmly. "But I daresay you have observed, as I have, that it is always the great who wear most simplicity of heart. When you know London as I do, the pretensions of Nothing will sicken you. But there, I must not rail. Do you see that very handsome man speaking to Waldron now? That is Richard Woodgate, the novelist. You do not know him, of course; neither do I, and I am not sure that I want to. It is so different a face from Waldron's, isn't it? though there can be no physical comparison between them. He has written one book which I think came near being a great work, and they say he has another ready now. Many think he has not advanced, that he will never write another; that is, he may make books, you know, but not literature—it is rather a sad thought."

"I hope you are mistaken," said Helen quickly. "You do not know, I see, that I am Mrs. Woodgate."

"Oh!" The little woman was covered with confusion. "I am sure I sincerely beg your pardon. Now that is just like me—I am so consummately stupid. I never pay any attention to names. I hope you will forgive me."

"There is nothing to forgive," replied Helen, with her kind, bright smile. "A frank expression of opinion should not be offensive; but I hope you are mistaken."

"I hope so, I am sure, and very likely I am; but when I come to think of it, it was not my own opinion I was ventilating, but that of other people. I should not presume to criticise Mr. Woodgate's work. What a mercy I did not say something worse! Now, what an unfortunate beginning to our acquaintance!"

"You must not say that," said Helen, still smiling, though

the little woman's words had sunk into her heart all the

"Will you excuse me saying you are the very handsomest couple I have ever seen?" quoth Miss Ryder then, her equanimity restored. "I am often laughed at and made fun of, because I make all my heroes handsome and my heroines lovely; but that is quite natural, and as it should be. Nobody wants to contemplate an ugly object, if it can possibly be avoided. I am quite sure if I made my ladies and gentlemen ugly, I should make a general slaughter of them to finish up, and that would be too ridiculous!"

Helen laughed so heartily and so spontaneously that the little woman joined in it, and that laugh made them the best of friends.

"Do you write?" she inquired next.

"Not at all. I am only an appreciative reader," replied Helen.

"That is a great deal. I think, on the whole, you may be rather glad you don't write. I know all about it, and especially as you are married to a genius. It is always said that two literary people do not pull well together, though the Brownings were a lovely exception; an ideal marriage theirs, was it not?—such as I always try to depict in my stories, but, of course, you have never read any of them."

"Tell me some of their titles. It is quite possible I may have read them."

"That is not likely. I don't write books—only serial stories for the newspapers, periodicals chiefly. Not very ambitious work, Mrs. Woodgate; but it pays very well, and that is my chief concern in the meantime, till my boys are provided for."

"Your boys?" repeated Helen in surprise. "I thought the Countess said Miss Ryder."

"So she did," said the little woman, with a nod. "But I have four all the same, my brother's orphans, left to my care about ten years ago. I have had to give them everything. He was a struggling journalist, and died in debt. I've paid that too, every copper, and brought up the boys; proud and glad is their poor little aunt Sophy that she can do it. Only

sometimes"—in the slight pause the careworn look deepened in her face, making its outline very haggard—"I wish they did not grow out of their clothes so dreadfully fast, and that their appetites were not so prodigious. But there, of course, I am only joking; I am thankful they grow and eat so well. It is their education that has been troubling me—they are very clever boys, though I say it; they've got brains, Mrs. Woodgate, and it pays to give brains a chance. The Countess thinks so too, and she will give my boys' brains the best of chances, so she has promised." Again the little woman's eyes followed the radiant figure of Hilda von Reutensee, and this time there was adoration, pure and simple, in their depths.

"It is charity, of course, but charity of the heavenliest sort," said Miss Ryder, and her very voice grew mellifluous with her hidden feeling; "and I am not ashamed of it, not in the least, but proud that it has come in my way. Since the blessed day I met her, my belief in my kind has been restored. It had fallen very low. One cannot help one's harsh thoughts, when there are four hungry boys at one's knee and no bread in the house."

Involuntarily Helen laid her hand with a quick gesture of sympathy on the little woman's withered fingers, and her eyes were full of tears. Miss Ryder nodded once or twice, and wiped her own eyes.

She put it so beautifully to me at first, when my pride revolted at the idea of charity. She said that if one woman had a little more given her, it was her duty, her simple duty, as it ought to be her joy, to share it with others to whom destiny had been harder. A beautiful gospel, is it not, Mrs. Woodgate, the gospel of Christ?"

"It is," Helen answered simply, and her eyes dwelt with a new light in them on the animated face of Hilda von Reutensee, while she stood between the folding doors, the centre of an admiring throng. Helen's own husband was there, and his face wore a rapt expression, showing that he was, for the moment, entirely absorbed in the beautiful woman before him. The sight gave Helen no pang. She believed her honour and her happiness safe in the hands of Hilda von Reutensee.

"You would not think, seeing her now," said the little woman, following her glance, "that she would have time or inclination to consider a case like mine. But I could tell you a dozen such stories, only my own is the most interesting to me. Strange how I should desire to give you so much confidence! Your face inspires it. She has always known my desire to have one of my stories published, to see my name on the title-page of a real book, if only that my boys might be able to show it one day to their children. And she has taken the trouble to read a great many of my stories, and to pick out what she thought the best. And she took it herself to Davenant,—just think, to Davenant!—who publishes only the highest literature, and he has agreed to give me a royalty on every copy. It is to be ready in spring. I have not told my boys yet; it is to be a surprise for them, and we will make a little festival over it, and be as happy as only those can be who have known the sadness of hope deferred."

"I thank you for telling me all this," said Helen in a low voice. "I thank you very much. I shall never forget it."

"How good of you to say so! I think you have given me a new inspiration now, and I must put you in my next book. But you must not think I am one of those foolish people who tell their story to everybody. I can be discreet on occasion. Do you see that—that person in the red plush gown over the way? I cannot call her a lady. She is Amelia Briscowe, the editor of the *Woman's Kingdom*, a dreadful person, I assure you—no heart, no anything, to fit her for the place she fills. She belongs to our club. Has the Countess told you about our club? I hope you will come one day, just to see how many women there are with aspirations. It will make you sad. But this Miss Briscowe, she is so objectionable, because she has a fixed salary and an assured position. She sits upon me frightfully. She has even said to me that there ought to be a punishment for those who provide the fiction for provincial newspapers. Of course she meant me, and of course I felt it; but when I told the Countess, she only laughed, and said it was pure jealousy, because Miss Briscowe has never been able

to write a story anybody could read. The jealousy, dear Mrs. Woodgate, is awful, positively awful. But here comes Mr. Waldron, and the Countess is beckoning to me. I must go. If I have not entirely bored you to death, I hope you will let me talk to you again. You are so sympathetic and so true."

"Indeed I shall," replied Helen, with great heartiness; "and I hope you will come and see me at my home. We live at Hampstead and you must bring your boys to spend a long day with me."

"Oh, that would be delightful—such a treat for Tim and Tony and Jack and Pat. Irish? Yes, we are very Irish. I was born in Connaught. Yes, I should dearly love to come; but do you think Mr. Woodgate would like it?" she added doubtfully; "for, of course, I am very small fry."

"Come and see," said Helen, with her lovely smile, which sent the tired little woman away with a gleam of sunshine at her heart. Her place was taken by the grave, gentle-faced man whom the world numbered among its masters in art. Both were pleased to renew the pleasant acquaintance begun that past summer in the drawing-room of old Madam Douglas, at Teviothead.

By this time the rooms were filling. Late as usual, Hargreaves dropped in, and after paying his respects to his hostess, for whom he entertained a chivalrous regard, he stationed himself in an unobserved nook to note who was in the room. Of all present he had some knowledge, except the lady talking to Waldron; and, being interested in her face, he wondered what new lion the Countess had captured, since she did not look like a *protégé*. He found himself again and again glancing in her direction, noting the animated, earnest, speaking face, the bright, gentle eye, the air of ladyhood, the indefinable charm of the whole woman. She looked so natural and so real; there was a freshness in her face which seemed to breathe a purer mental atmosphere than that of a London drawing-room. Curiously enough, it was to Woodgate he put his question concerning her.

"Who is that handsome woman in black smiling so divinely

on the lucky Waldron?" he asked in his usual bantering way. "Has the Countess caught a new lion?"

"I believe she thinks so," answered Woodgate, with a laugh of conscious pride. "If you come over, I'll introduce you, though you really don't deserve it."

"You don't mean to say that is Mrs. Woodgate, Dick?"

Woodgate nodded, and his eye lit up at the implied compliment to his taste.

"Oh!"

Hargreaves elevated his brows, took another critical survey of Helen, who had never looked better than at the moment. Waldron was speaking to her of the beauties of Teviotdale and Liddesdale, and her heart was in her eyes.

"I wish I had come to Hampstead before this, but how was I to know she was like that?" Hargreaves said, with a sober and delightful frankness. "It's a pity to interrupt a conversation evidently so engrossing to both, but I should like, if you'll allow me, to make my apologies at once."

"Come on then," said Woodgate graciously; and the pair piloted their way across the room, and, taking advantage of a brief pause in their conversation, Woodgate mentioned Hargreaves' name to his wife. She looked up quickly, nervously, scanning his face with a certain questioning of which Hargreaves was quite conscious.

She was not at first favourably impressed by his appearance, which presented a striking contrast to that of her husband. His dress was careless to the verge of slovenliness, and there was a certain indolence and indifference in his whole bearing, which almost verged on the supercilious. But there was a suggestion of strength in his massive head, a fearless honesty in his eye, and a directness in his address which she felt were grand attributes of a manly character. For a few seconds the conversation was general, then Woodgate took Waldron away, leaving his wife and Hargreaves to begin the friendship destined to bless them both.

CHAPTER XIX

“So circled lives she with Love’s holy light,
That from the shade of self she walketh free.”



ELEN was the first to break the silence when they were left together. She felt Hargreaves’ eyes upon her critically, questioningly, and it was perhaps natural that she must fear his disapproval. She had heard much of him as a man of the keenest discrimination, and Woodgate himself habitually spoke of him with the profoundest respect. Yet he was a man who had done nothing to separate himself from the mass of mankind, no worthy or lasting work was attached to his name, but he was a distinct and impressive personality to all who knew him.

“I have heard my husband speak of you, Mr. Hargreaves,” she said simply; “and I am glad to make your acquaintance.”

“I do not deserve that you should speak to me so kindly,” he made answer. “I ought to have paid my respects to you long ago; but since Dick has spoken of me, he may have told you that I am a Bohemian of the Bohemians, and that those who know me suffer my shortcomings, regarding them as incurable.”

“He has not told me anything of the sort,” replied Helen, with a swift gleam of amusement in her eye. “Is it true that you felt inclined to send my husband to Coventry because he had married me?”

Hargreaves laughed one of his queer silent laughs, and sat down directly in front of her, as if he intended to enjoy a thoroughly good talk.

"Have you been here before—in this house, I mean?" he inquired.

"No, this is my first experience. I have found it most interesting, and not a little instructive."

"Instructive?" repeated Hargreaves, in a tone of significant inquiry.

"Very. I have talked for nearly an hour with Miss Ryder. Do you know her?"

"Oh yes, poor little soul. Well?"

"From her I have learned a good deal; how hard, for one thing, it is for some to live."

"And what more?"

"I have acquired an increased respect for the Countess."

"Which will not be diminished as you learn to know her better," said Hargreaves sincerely. "Yes, there is more than one in this room she has saved from mental and moral destruction. She is a Christian woman in a sense not accepted or understood by many who name His name. So you have come up from the breezy mountains of Scotland to this Sahara? I wonder what the result will be," he said, bending his deep eyes upon her musingly.

His manner was familiar for a first meeting, but it was no familiarity the most fastidious could resent. Certainly Helen did not; she liked him more and more, and felt the curious fascination which he could exercise when he chose, though it was unconscious always.

"The result? What do you mean?"

"London is bound to work some change, the conditions of its life necessitate it. Sometimes, in my darker hours, I regret having come to it, but I shall never leave it now. I know I could not live away from it."

"But you are very busy always, are you not?" asked Helen, a trifle hesitatingly, not being able to recall anything Hargreaves had done in the literary world.

"Oh, I have enough to do. I'm a penny-a-liner. I keep body and soul together by my pen, just as poor little Sophy Ryder does; and grinding drudgery it is, only her impossible ladies and gentlemen, and their impossible adventures, afford her an amount of genuine interest and satisfaction which I often wonder at. She has been at it for thirty years, and has not outlived the freshness of it, nor the aspiration to do something worthier. I often wish, for her sake, she could get the chance, which she most richly deserves."

Helen looked at him a moment silently. He spoke as one who had tasted the bitterness of life, and had lost faith in its sweetness.

And as she looked, there came to her a vague fear lest this life in London, of which those who knew it best spoke so harshly, should work some dread change in her also. Almost they seemed to expect it.

"Why have you never risen above what you say you are?" she asked, wondering as she spoke at her own boldness. "You look as if you could accomplish anything you willed."

Hargreaves gave his shoulders a little shrug, but did not meet the clear eyes looking so directly into his face. He had never in his life had that question put to him so plainly, and it made him ashamed, until the dark flush slowly dyed his cheek.

"Once I also thought so, but there came a time when the iron entered into my soul. I emerged from that mad storm a derelict, and have so remained. One day, perhaps, I may tell you more. I am hearing daily fresh rumours about your husband's new book, written since his marriage; now I shall be impatient for its appearance; it ought to bind a fresh laurel on his brow."

It was a gratifying compliment, delicately conveyed; it was impossible for Helen not to be gratified by it. Her colour rose a little, and she leaned forward, moved to breathe to this man with the grave, stern face and melancholy eyes, something of her secret fear.

"So many have said to me that his best work is done" she

said, with a touch of wistful appeal. "You have been long his friend, and know him well. Do you think they are right? He is so young, and looks capable," she said, with a swift glance towards Woodgate, who hovered, as usual, near the Countess. "To me it is an intolerable thought."

Hargreaves was deeply moved. In his soul he believed that, before Woodgate would be able to produce a worthy successor to his first book, he must change his attitude towards life and its problems, which he now regarded lightly, from the complacent pinnacle of success.

"Things have gone too easily with Dick," he answered, not seeking to evade the question. "He thinks there are no more worlds to conquer. But he is young, as you say; his powers are not really matured; the mellow wisdom of experience will yet come to him. Till then you and I can wait."

The last sentence comforted Helen inexpressibly. As the Countess came to her for the second time, she could not but wonder, seeing the expression on her face, what had been the topic of their talk.

"Am I too tiresome?" she asked, with her beautiful smile, as she laid her hand with lightest touch on Helen's shoulder. "I am destined to interrupt you always at a most interesting point. It is you, my dear, I want to shine for the public rather than the individual good. I have very little music to-night. Our friend the organist has not come. Your husband tells me you sing, Mrs. Woodgate—will you do so now?"

"Willingly," said Helen, and rose at once. Hargreaves looked at these two women, each a queen, stole an involuntary glance at Woodgate, and many strange thoughts came to him. When they moved together across the room, all eyes following them, the expression on Hargreaves' face did not change. He continued to watch Helen closely, noting how devoid she was of the smallest affectation, yet what grace was in every movement. She played from memory, and gradually, as the music filled the room, the garment of speech seemed to

fall from those present, until the silence became most impressive. But the player did not seem to notice it; she had forgotten them. Her heart was back with her own people; her ears heard the sweet sound of church bells ringing through the stillness of the Sabbath morning; her spirit was touched with the holiness of heaven. And some of the careless, godless souls present felt that there had come among them one who still revered the old faith, and from whom the unseen was not hid. Quite suddenly the exquisite melody ended, and, striking a few chords, she began to sing. She had in a moment remembered her desire to use such opportunity as offered itself to give some Sabbath message to those who listened to her. The song was, "Too late," and as the sad, passionate words, wedded to their appropriate music, left her lips, many hearts were stirred, and many eyes filled with tears. When she rose, no one spoke, and she stole back to her corner, during the silence, without any feeling of embarrassment. Hargreaves drew her chair forward, and said only two words—"Thank you." Then talk began again, and presently a slender, pale woman, in a widow's gown, came across the room, and held out two hands impulsively to Helen.

"May I thank you for your singing? It sunk into my heart. You do not know me; but I have had great sorrow, and you have comforted me."

"Let me make you known to each other," said Hargreaves, as he gave his seat to the new-comer. "This is Mrs. Garbutt—Mrs. Woodgate; her husband was known to yours in life."

"I have heard of him," replied Helen.

Then Hargreaves went away, and the two women drew their chairs close together, and Lucy Garbutt began to talk. Hargreaves went to the side of the Countess, but she could not speak to him just for a moment.

"Well," she said at length, lowering her voice a little so that others might not hear, "what do you think of her? Is she not all I said, and more?"

"The mystery deepens," responded Hargreaves, with his expressive shrug. "How has he won her, and what will he do with her now she is won?"

"Either she will ennoble him, or he will break her heart," said Hilda von Reutensee, without any manner of hesitation. "Which is the likelier?"

He shook his head, and a smile passed between them, and though Hargreaves saw Woodgate beckoning him with his brows, he appeared not to see his summons. He felt that, in his present mood, he could not stand Woodgate's pretentious talk, and very shortly took himself away, having got a new problem to solve, a new study to give a piquant flavour to his solitary pipe.

"So you are Mrs. Woodgate," began Lucy Garbutt; "I have so often wondered what you would be like. Mr. Woodgate used to come often to our house when I had my husband. He and Hargreaves and Charlie were the inseparable trio; and now it is all so changed. It is a fearful thing to be left a widow, Mrs. Woodgate."

"It must be; but you have your children," said Helen gently.

"Oh, I have six of them, but they do not make up for him. We were so happy, and might have been so still, had Charlie only been appreciated as he deserved. It is a very hard world, Mrs. Woodgate, and the most deserving are the most hardly treated by it."

"Was he a writer?" asked Helen, not being able to remember hearing what was Garbutt's calling.

"Why, yes; he was on the staff of the *Albemarle Review*, and made that paper what it is. Everybody knew its most brilliant pages were written by him," said the widow, with conscious pride. "And they treated him shamefully, just as they have treated me. Of course, poor Charlie could not leave me a princely fortune. How was it possible, off a meagre salary, and six children to support? and when he died they circulated such lies about him, seeking to take from his children all he had left them—a blameless name."

"But you have found some kind hearts left, I trust?" said Helen then.

"Oh yes; the Countess has been most kind, I will say that. But she is a rich woman, and it is nothing for her to give. Of course, she can't understand *my* feelings on account of her curious position. Of course you know she is separated from her husband, and that it was a very queer tale. No doubt there were faults on both sides."

Helen shrank a little from Lucy Garbutt, not liking the shrewd little venomous look which accompanied these significant words. Jealousy was at the bottom of it. Mrs. Garbutt grudged the Countess such things as she had, not knowing how powerless they were to fill the aching void of a woman's heart.

"I don't know the story, except what the Countess has herself told me," said Helen quietly, but a trifle coldly; "and it is enough for me. I am sure she is a noble, good, generous woman, and many here so regard her. But let us talk of something else. My husband tells me you are fond of art—have you a studio? We have gone to housekeeping lately, and are in want of many things. May I come and see you?—perhaps we may be of mutual use to each other."

"Oh, thanks, yes, I shall be glad. I receive twice a month, too, on Tuesdays; but perhaps it would be wise to come on another day. I have not much in my studio just now. People were very kind after Charlie died," she said plaintively, "and I have been rather idle lately. How Mr. Woodgate admires the Countess!—that is how she loses her friends among married women. I used positively to hate her, for, of course, it is easy to look charming when one can spend fifty pounds on one gown. What day shall you come? Oh, any day—Wednesday, at three, if you like. Well, Mr. Woodgate, your wife and I have made acquaintance, you see. Are you going to take her away?"

"It is nearly eleven, Helen. Are you not tired?" he said, with kind solicitude, and not paying much attention to Lucy Garbutt, whom he could not endure.

"Not tired, but ready to go, dear, if you like," Helen said, rising at once. "Mrs. Garbutt and I have been talking of her pictures, and I may go to her studio on Wednesday."

"Very well. Children well, Mrs. Garbutt? We are all glad to see you again after your long retirement," said Woodgate courteously.

"I assure you it is against my feelings, but the Countess would insist; and of course she does not understand. Nobody *can* know a widow's feelings but those who have gone through it."

"Of course not; but the Countess would do nothing inconsiderate, and you are wise to let her guide you," said Woodgate, and put his wife's hand on his arm.

The Countess accompanied him to the landing, and there, putting her two hands on Helen's shoulders, kissed her once, and for the first time.

"I thank you. I will tell you some day what you have done to-night—what you have come among us to do," she said in a curious voice. "Good-night, Mr. Woodgate. You are the man of all men in London to be envied."

Woodgate and his wife drove home to Hampstead almost in silence, neither being inclined apparently for talk. When they entered the house, however, Helen turned to him suddenly, her white cloak falling from her shoulders, her sweet face upturned to him with that wistfulness he most dreaded, since it always seemed to carry with it some reproach.

"Are you not pleased with me, Richard, that you are so quiet. Did I do wrong, or have I disappointed you in any way?"

"Disappointed me, Helen? God forbid!" he cried, and took her to his heart with a passion most unusual. "You are a good woman, too good for me. Pray, since you believe in prayer, that I may be made more worthy of you."

CHAPTER XX

"Sure the last end
Of the good man is peace."

THE Woodgates did not go to Scotland the following week. Proofs of *Brunehilde* continued to come in slowly, and a snowstorm blocked the Cheviot railroad. At the last the visit was abandoned till the spring, and if Helen felt disappointed, she said nothing. After the Countess's reception she seemed to acquire several new interests. Mrs. Garbutt's studio in Russell Square was duly visited, and several purchases made, but Helen did not draw to the little woman, who, though undoubtedly clever, had an uncharitable cast of mind and a venomous tongue. Sometimes her perpetual talk of her husband and her widowed state, her setting of herself apart, as if there never had been so sad a case as hers, jarred upon Helen, and even at times she felt inclined to doubt her sincerity. Her attitude towards life and its hardships was very different from that of Sophy Ryder, who made the best of everything and was cheerful always. When not cheerful, she hid her face. But Mrs. Garbutt made capital out of her misfortunes, as many do, and while bewailing her sad fate, knew, as did everybody else, that she had never been so well off in poor Garbutt's lifetime. A good fellow in some respects, he had been thoughtless and selfish, and absolutely devoid of any sense of responsibility.

Miss Ryder spent the promised day at Hampstead with the

four rollicking Irish lads, and the happy understanding between them and Aunt Soph, as they irreverently called her, did Helen good. It was a glimpse of the real among much that was unreal in her London life.

In Christmas week a great joy came to Helen, one which amply compensated for every disappointment, in the shape of a visit from her father, unexpected and unannounced. Acting upon one of those unusual impulses which do not come very often to a man of his placid temperament, he rose up one morning, packed his portmanteau, and joined the London train at their own station. What that Christmas was to Helen it is impossible to say. Years after she looked back upon it as one of the golden epochs of that brief but untroubled time. The good minister did not tell her that he had missed something in her letters, that his soul had yearned so unspeakably over her that he had come to see with his own eyes how it was with her. And it seemed well; for at his coming an exquisite peace seemed to settle down upon the house. Woodgate, having disposed of all his proofs, and now waiting placidly the delayed publication of his book, was in a good mood, and exerted himself to the utmost to make his father-in-law's visit a happy one. As for Helen, at sight of that dear face, set with the seal of the peace the world can neither give nor take away, all her troubles fell from her like a garment for which she had no further use. She could not remember the perplexities which had vexed her soul, though, in those halcyon days she unconsciously drew great draughts of strength from that fountain of wisdom and experience, and was happy as a child. Her chief regret was that Hilda von Reutensee and her father did not meet, she being in Jersey for Christmas. But Hargreaves came, and the two so oddly contrasted, in most respects one would have thought opposite as the poles, seemed to find some kinship with each other, and in many tramps over the Heath discussed the philosophies of life.

Mr. Lockhart returned to the Dale utterly content about Helen. The experiment he had so greatly feared had turned

out a perfect success; and he was not slow to make his quiet boast over it among those who sometimes shook their heads. And it was well he thought so—that he suspected no undercurrent. All her life Helen remembered with thankfulness how he had blessed her at parting, telling her his heart was at rest.

Not many days after his return a great calamity happened in the Dale, one which was never afterwards spoken of but with hushed, unsteady voice and starting tear.

The first Sunday he occupied his own pulpit, in the middle of the opening prayer, which long remained in the memories of those who heard it, he suddenly laid down his head upon the Book, and that was the end. Thus fittingly did that true soul, purer than most, after sixty years of earthly existence, return to the God who gave it. On Monday morning Woodgate and Helen arrived, and in two more days all was over. The great burying, to be long spoken of in the Dale, had taken place in the old churchyard, and the doors of Broadrule Manse closed for ever on the name of Lockhart. But the fragrance of it continued to hallow the place: "the memory of the just is blessed." The shock of the calamity had so serious an effect on the delicate health of Mrs. Douglas, that Helen remained at Broadyards, Woodgate returning alone to town.

It was destined to be a longer separation than either anticipated. In the last week of January the child was born dead, and such was Annie's condition that her sister could not leave her. During this period, as was inevitable, Brian Laidlaw and Helen saw much of each other. He soon felt, as he had never yet felt, how completely Helen was now severed from the Dale, and from him. She had passed out of his life, her interests were such as he knew not, and could not possibly share. He watched her with a yearning keenness, his eyes sharpened by the great passion of his life, but failed to detect in her the least sign of disappointment or regret. He saw her eyes brighten and her cheek delicately flush when her husband's letters were brought to her, and judged therefrom that the husband was dearer than the lover had ever been. And that

was well. A load was lifted from the honest, unselfish heart of Brian, and he went about his work as if he had gotten a new impulse. Helen's manner towards him was a thing so beautiful it can hardly be described. But its chief characteristic was a perfect trust, which betrayed itself in every look and tone. She thought him older, graver, more sobered in every way, and wondered often at his gentleness, his skill, and his untiring patience.

"You remind me every day, Brian," she said once, when her sister had been more than usually trying and capricious, "of Luke, the beloved physician. If I have to send for a doctor in London, I shall be very difficult to please."

"That is high praise, Mrs. Woodgate," he said, with some slight constraint, and his face flushed. "I wish," he added, with a quick smile, "that you could imbue Mrs. Douglas with a little of your confidence in me. What do you think she has just said to me? that she is sure I do not know my business, and she will make Guy send for an Edinburgh professor."

"How ungrateful! but you must not mind her, Brian. Poor Annie, she is so weak and ill, she must not be held responsible."

"Oh, I don't mind it at all. I am quite hardened, I do assure you. There is another thing I would wish to see, Mrs. Woodgate, and that is Mrs. Douglas regarding your great sorrow from your standpoint. She says she has no desire to live, and that is always a difficult mood to deal with."

"Yet I do not think, Brian, that Annie loved papa more dearly than I," said Helen, and her lips trembled. "It has made a great difference. He was so helpful always; he understood everything so quickly; and we were so dear to him."

Brian bit his lips and turned away. It was no common sorrow, and he could share it to the full; yet he had no right to comfort her, and she was yet too perilously dear to him for him to attempt it.

"There is only Time, merciful to every wound," he said, but lamely, and went his way.

Helen watched him stride down the avenue, and her heart

was tender to him, because of his simplicity, his true manhood, his big loving heart. She did not really know how constantly her image dwelt with him, how her marriage had changed his views of life. She believed, indeed, that he had loved her after a fashion, with a steadfast affection which had grown with him from their childhood, not knowing she was the passion of his manhood, and that even yet, another man's wife though she was, his whole soul clave to her.

She was still thinking of him when she returned to her sister's room, and it seemed natural she should speak of him.

"Don't you think Brian much improved, Annie? I have just been telling him that when I have to send for a doctor in London, I shall be hard to please. I shall not be likely to find another Brian Laidlaw."

"It's a pity you didn't find out his incomparable qualities sooner, Helen," replied Mrs. Douglas in her most petulant mood. "I am quite tired of him, and I told him I should make Guy send to Edinburgh for another doctor."

"Guy won't do it, Annie, even to please you, unless Brian himself thinks it necessary, and he doesn't," replied Helen quietly.

"Well, if I die, the consequences must be on all your heads," retorted the invalid shortly. "I've had a letter from Madam. She returns to Teviothead to-day from Mentone, awfully disappointed because she couldn't visit you in London. How thankful you must be! she is such a prying old thing."

Helen laughed. A woman who could express herself in such energetic terms could not be so very weak after all; indeed, none of them were now seriously concerned about her, and Brian had told Guy frankly that she might get up any day that she had a mind. But when would the mind come? There appeared no sign of it yet, she evidently regarded herself as in a most critical state.

"I wish you'd sit down, Helen, and let's have a decent talk. You are so restless, you look as if you had something on your conscience. It's such a pity you don't have any children. I was saying so to Brian to-day."

"There is plenty of time yet, Annie," said Helen meekly, as she sat down at the window. "I am very well content as I am."

"Oh, but you won't be long content. Nobody is. Married people ought to have children. Besides, as you are, you are no good really to me. It is so disappointing not to have talks"—

"About babies?"

"Yes, of course. What else could we have talks about?"

"Not much, certainly, when one comes to think of it," said Helen, much amused. "Is it not because you can't pour out all the advice you have been storing up for me?"

"How can you laugh so merrily, Helen, so soon after poor papa's death?" cried Mrs. Douglas in keen reproach. "It sounds so dreadfully heartless. I said to Guy this morning that I was quite sure I should never be happy again."

"Is that not rather hard on Guy?" inquired Helen in a very still voice, and with a curious look in her face.

"How can it be? He knows how fond I was of poor dear papa! It would be quite heartless of him to expect me to be as bright and cheerful as I used to be, and I must say I cannot help wondering at you. Why, nobody, I believe, has once seen you cry. What are you made of?"

Helen winced just slightly, and turned her face a little more towards the window, from which she could see the church, and even, under the spreading yew trees, the outline, under the snow, of a new-made grave. There rested "all that was mortal," as the inscription ran, of Edward Lockhart, but the soul had gone to its immortal home; but it seemed to Helen at times that the presence unseen still lingered to comfort those to whom it had ever been an inspiration and a benediction.

"There is a danger, Annie," she began in a low voice, which had a far-off cadence in it, "apt to arise out of grief like ours, and which we must guard ourselves against,—the danger of indulging too much in unavailing regret. It does no good to the dead, and it is not kind to the living to wear always a mournful face."

"Oh, Helen Lockhart, how awful it is to hear you!" cried Mrs. Douglas, pushing back her short fair curls with a fretful, impatient hand. "I have always feared that London would convert you into a dreadful kind of person—and now I know it. Poor dear papa, to be forgotten so soon! It is a mercy he was taken. It would have grieved him so much to see how you have changed."

Helen coloured deeply, and her eyes filled with bitter tears. But she smiled a faint, dreary smile as she turned her face to her sister and tried to reason with her.

"Annie, you speak thoughtlessly too often. You would not willingly hurt or wound anybody, I know—me least of all. You and I do not see things from the same standpoint, and it is better that we should not argue. You do not think what you are saying when you accuse me of disrespect to the darling memory which is all that is left to us now. Papa understood me, Annie, though you do not; and I don't think he had any misgivings. Some day I shall show you a letter he wrote to me the Friday night before he was taken, and then perhaps you will understand what he was to me and I to him, and how impossible it is that I can ever have in 'his world a more precious possession than his memory.'"

It was seldom Helen spoke so much, or with such passion. Annie lay quiet under it, somewhat awed indeed by the expression on her sister's face. Helen, however, gave her no opportunity just then to withdraw or modify her words. She could not at the moment endure any more, and immediately left the room. She caught up a cap and a shawl from the hall-stand, and went out into the grey stillness of the wintry afternoon. The cold was less intense, the wind had fallen, and a few stray flakes of snow fell thinly through the silent air. She took, as was natural in that moment of tension, the path by the river to the churchyard, and in less than ten minutes stood, for the first time, beside her father's grave. She had not hitherto cared to visit it; the place had no message for her, no comfort—it simply covered "all that was mortal." But the stillness of the place, its hallowed associations, its many

memories, spoke to her heart, and her tears fell in blessed relief. A prayer mingled with these tears, a passionate prayer which must have pierced the heavens. She was now alone in the world ; surrounded, it is true, by those who called themselves her friends, but to whom her soul was not revealed. But God was in heaven, and her father's spirit might yet return to guide and comfort her.

CHAPTER XXI

"The home of memory
Of buried hopes."

AS Helen crossed the park on her return, a carriage drove up to the door of Broadyards. She recognised the Teviothead livery, though she could not see the honest face of John Haliburton, who had been in Madam's service since she came a bride to Broadyards. She reached the door in time to welcome the old lady when she stepped from her carriage.

"Dear me, Helen, is that you?" she said fussily. "And where have ye been, nicht I ask, at this time in sic a guise?"

Helen pointed towards the churchyard, but did not speak. Madam nodded silently, and turned to her coachman.

"I'll be half an hour exactly, John, so ye can dae what ye think fit; only be round here punctually at half-past four." Then she followed Helen into the house.

"Will you go up now, Madam, or shall I tell Annie first? It is just possible she may be asleep. She often gets drowsy after her early dinner, and sleeps till tea-time."

"Oh, there's nae hurry. Let me speak wi' you first, Helen," said Madam, and, laying down her fur mantle, motioned Helen rather imperiously into the library. "Eh, lass! I'm wae for you an' for the Dale," she said; and Helen observed her hands tremble as she spoke. "I hurried awa' whenever I heard it;

but what have I hurried to? It would have set me better had I bidden where I was."

"It was a long journey to take in winter, when it was for your health you went abroad, Madam," said Helen, and drew in a chair for the old lady, stirring the fire till it blazed merrily in the grate. She had knelt down on the hearthrug to do it, and so remained, gazing into the fire. She felt nervous and unstrung, and had not a word to say. Madam untied her bonnet-strings and threw them back on her shoulders; then took a long, deliberate survey of the woman on the hearth, noting the slender, supple curves of the figure in the sombre black gown, and the strong, sweet, serious outline of her face.

"Ye are thinner, Helen—much thinner. And hoo is it wi' you, my lassie?"

The tenderness in the voice, usually somewhat harsh and shrill, was more than Helen could bear, and she could only give her head a quick shake and press her hands to her eyes to keep back the willing tears. "Oh, Madam, it is a sore loss; we miss him so terribly. It is hard to say God is good, even though we know it is well with him."

"I thocht it needless mysel' to cut off sic a life in its prime—a life that has preached its sermon to us ilka day for so many years. It may be we dinna think enough o' oor mercies; but I couldna but think the Lord micht hae lookit round first and seen how sairly he was needit in the Dale." The quaint directness of her speech arrested Helen, and she looked for the first time full into the beautiful, proud old face, to which sorrow had given a mellowing touch.

"You also loved him, Madam," she said impulsively, and, leaning forward, touched the white gemmed hands with her lips.

"I did. Had he but said the word, Helen Lockhart, I would hae left Teviothead for Broadrule Manse any day in the week, and thocht mysel' a favoured woman. That was the love I had for him, Helen Lockhart, for twenty year and more; but he bade true to your mother's memory, and he never thocht what a foolish old woman abode at Teviothead. An' I sit here

before his ain dochter tellin' it, an' thinkin' nae shame—as why should I? To love Edward Lockhart was to love what was good, was it not, Helen? Are ye thinkin' shame for me, or what?"

"Oh no, Madam," Helen said; but her face had flushed hotly. She leaned forward a second time and kissed Madam on the lips. And a quiver ran over Madam's face, and she brushed something from her eyes as if ashamed of her passing weakness.

"There, there, that's past, Helen. Forget what I hae said, if ye can; if no, dinna think less o' me than you can help. Now, come, tell me first, how is Mistress Guy?"

"Improving," replied Helen, glad to change the subject. "But she is very fretful and trying. I came so near losing my temper with her this afternoon that I had to run out of the house. How little patience we have with each other, after all!"

"Um! that's so. I lookit in at Broadrule as I passed, and was fortunate to find the doctors in. Brian says she's had a serious turn, but mending fine. It was a disappointment about the bairn, but, bless me! there'll be plenty bairns yet, maybe mair than they want. And there's my bonnie wee man, very weel too, Brian says."

Helen smiled, thinking of the precious child in the nursery, who, since her coming to Broadyards, had given to her the needed sunshine every day.

"Guy is well, and a child who might make up for anything," she said, with a faint sigh. "I had better go, Madam, had I not? and tell Annie you have come. She is in that state, that if she hears I have kept you here, she will be very cross indeed."

"Oh, let her," said Madam, very coolly. "I'd rather talk to you than to her any day, Helen, an' ye dinna gang a foot till ye tell me something aboot yersel'. Are ye happy in London, bairn, tell me that?"

"Yes, Madam, I am very happy."

"But ye hae found some things not to yer liking, I could wager," said Madam shrewdly.

"Many things," replied Helen frankly. "But these should

not, and do not, affect my happiness. Did you hear what a happy visit we had from papa at Christmas?"

"I did. He wrote me once from your house. I'll show you the letter some day, Helen, when I think you need it. Blithe was I to get it, Helen, and blithe am I to hear that Richard Woodgate has proved hissel' fit to handle the blessin' we, in the Dale, thocht he hadna earned or deserved. Now I'll gang up the stair; you can slip up first while I see my bonnie wee man; an' if she's sleepin' dinna wauken her. I can come again the morn."

She rose up and moved majestically across the floor, Helen's eyes following her fine figure with a new and even a tender interest. The woman who had loved her father silently for twenty years! She was invested with a new grace and pathos, and could never be uninteresting any more to Helen's heart.

Mrs. Douglas, being still asleep, was not disturbed, and having paid her respects and left her very substantial French gifts in the nursery to delight the soul of her "wee man," Madam took her leave, promising to come again on the morrow.

She made John Haliburton stop the carriage at the church, and went into the churchyard, the second visitor that afternoon to the new-made grave. She stayed but a minute, and when she left, she was like a woman in sore distress, but kept her veil down, half-ashamed that her old servant should see her unusual tears. So Edward Lockhart had died in ignorance of Madam's feelings towards him, and none dreamed that the world was now a changed world to the lonely mistress of Teviothead.

Brian came up again that evening after dinner, and Helen took the opportunity of asking him whether she need now remain at Broadyards, Madam having returned to take her place.

"There is no need. Mrs. Douglas is really getting well fast; she will be able to get up, I expect, on Sunday—if she will," he added, with the smile Helen understood. "You have been here a long time, Mrs. Woodgate, and I can quite sympathise with your desire to return home."

There was always now a certain formality in Brian's speech

and manner when he spoke to Helen, and he was scrupulously observant always of her name. But it was impossible for Helen to call him anything but Brian, and she had never attempted it.

"This is Thursday; I think I must go home on Saturday. I'll tell Annie to-night she must spare me; but, of course, if she excites herself over it very much, I must just wait another week or so."

"Oh, I think she will be reasonable now she has Madam. How do you think the old lady looking? She feels our loss most acutely, it is easy to see that."

"Yes, she does. I have never understood Madam till now, Brian; and I have often had hard thoughts of her, which I never shall have again. Don't we misjudge each other in this world, and often don't discern it until it is too late? I shall see you to-morrow, I suppose?"

"I think not. I have to run in to Edinburgh to see a patient I have in the infirmary, that is why I came thrice to-day."

"Then if I should go on Saturday, I may not see you again," said Helen, a trifle disappointedly.

They were now in the hall, and Brian had opened the door. A cool whiff of the snow-wind rushed in and ruffled Helen's hair.

"Perhaps not, but I shall hear of your welfare from Mrs. Douglas," he said, and turned to her with outstretched hand. Helen saw that he was moved, his eyes spoke what his lips could not utter.

"May I say that I am glad you are so happy—I see it in your face now—at the thought of going home? That is as it should be. I thank God that the fears of those who loved you have been proved without foundation. You will permit so much from an old friend?"

"I will, Brian; I thank you for it," she said, and laid both her hands on his. "I have many, many blessings; none I prize more highly than your friendship, Brian."

"I am glad of it—honoured by it, as I said before," he said, and his blue eyes lost for a moment their bright keenness.

"I hope you will never need the help of a friend ; I do not think you will ; but if that day ever comes, I am ready."

He looked down upon her sweet face from his tall height, and, moved by its expression, bent and lightly touched her brow with his lips. Then he went out into the night, and Helen went back to her room weeping, she did not know why.

"Helen's talking of going, Brian," said Broadyards, as he stood by the doctor's horse in the stable yard. "She's regularly homesick, anybody can see that. The thing's turned out rather better than either you or I expected, old boy."

"What thing ?" queried Brian vaguely, for Helen's face was before him, and his heart was rent with a fierce pain he scarcely knew how to endure.

"Why, her marriage. They seem happy together. Mr. Lockhart said so, you know, when he came home, and now I am sure there is no doubt about it."

"Oh no ; I think not. Good-night, Guy," said Brian, and as he rode away his hand trembled on Bob's bridle, and he said under his breath, "Thank God ! thank God !"

CHAPTER XXII

“O blast, thine office do!”



ON the pier at Brighton two women walked slowly side by side, deeply engrossed in talk. It was a cold, blustering February afternoon, but they were dressed to brave the weather, and enjoyed to the full the salt-laden wind from the sea as it beat upon their faces.

“Are you not going to Reutensee this spring, Hilda?” Helen Woodgate asked.

“I think not. Gustav is now at the academy at Erlangen, and what is Reutensee without the boy? though I believe the old lady would be pleased to see me. I have not made any plans at all, but the Count has promised that I shall have Gustav part of the time with me when he has his holidays.”

“In England?” inquired Helen, with interest.

“Oh no; in Germany—at Baden, if I like, or elsewhere. No, no; the Count hates England and the English too heartily, he will never permit Gustav to set foot here so long as he is under his control. What are your plans for the summer? Could you not join us abroad? Perhaps Mr. Woodgate will spare you while he goes to Norway with Hargreaves, as I have heard talked of.”

“Perhaps,” said Helen, a little absently. “Don’t you think Richard seems very unsettled of late, Hilda? He is bitterly disappointed over his book.”

"He is, but it will not harm him, my dear," said the Countess lightly. "He has had but little adverse criticism in his career except from the more candid among his friends. Don't fret about him, it will do him good."

Helen said nothing, because in truth she was fretting a good deal. *Brunehilde* had not achieved that success fondly anticipated by its author, but had fallen rather flat, having positively been ignored in certain quarters where recognition was most important. The general verdict, calmly expressed, was that it did not equal its predecessor, and that Woodgate had not fulfilled his early promise.

Woodgate was very angry, and ascribed every description of mean motives to those who had expressed an adverse opinion. He was so vain a man that fair criticism was lost upon him; his assumption had disgusted many, and perhaps it was the case that more than one had enjoyed picking the new book to pieces simply because it was Woodgate's. These unfavourable notices which so maddened Woodgate, hurt Helen also, though in a different way, because she was forced to admit that they contained so much that was true.

"I advised him, nay, urged him, not to publish just now," said the Countess, noticing Helen's absent manner. "The thing was slipshod and sketchy, altogether unworthy of him; and to see the way he is behaving now, puts me out of all patience. What he ought to do now is to set to work on something that will refute all their croakings. Have you not advised him?"

"He will not be advised by me on that point," said Helen sadly. "It irritates him, apparently, that I should take any interest in it. And yet, how can I help it? It is a constant weight upon my soul, this thought that he may have done his best work—and he is only thirty-one."

Hilda von Reutensee stole a glance at her companion's face, wondering at the passion in her voice.

"Do you remember what I said to you at Florence, Helen, that suffering is the crown of genius? When he has suffered, then, perhaps, he will write what will make his name immortal.

He has all upon which his heart is set at present, and is asleep. Some day a great sorrow will come to him, and then he will awake, never to sleep again."

Both were silent, thinking over such a possibility, which, however, at the moment seemed remote.

"You spoke of poverty too, Hilda, at that time, I remember; but I have heard them say in our house that it grinds the souls of men to the very dust. Mrs. Garbutt has told me, too, of the terrible effect it had on her husband's genius. They must have suffered awfully. She says sometimes they had not bread to eat."

"That is quite true; they were in that condition when I found them first," said the Countess calmly. "But that was entirely poor Garbutt's fault. He had a fixed income; not a large one of course, still in thrifty hands it might have sufficed. They hadn't an idea between them, my dear, nor had Garbutt a scrap of genius. He was a fraud; but I must say that odd little woman, who has her good points, though she is far from lovable, seems to believe in him implicitly, and talks of him even to me as one of the unappreciated martyrs of whom the world was not worthy."

"I cannot understand it. Such self-deception would be impossible to me," said Helen, with a frankness which revealed more than she intended.

"I know; you look through clear eyes which nothing can deceive. A sham or a lie is killed by such a look. You must suffer more as you go through life, but you will have a rare satisfaction in what passes the bar of your judgment. I predict that you, and you alone, will make your husband great. It may be a long and arduous task; but you are fit, and when it is accomplished, you will feel like a queen."

Helen's face flushed, and her eyes shone as they had done when Hargreaves paid her a somewhat similar compliment.

"You are very good, and I know you are sincere," she replied simply, "only I cannot realise it. I have not sufficient confidence in myself. Often, indeed, I fear lest I should have exercised already some deteriorating influence upon my husband.

It is certain I do not share his work. To return to the question of money. It is less likely than ever that Richard will ever know the meaning of the sordid care he thinks so fatal to endeavour. I have inherited a small fortune from my father; and though I do not exactly know the extent of Richard's means, I know that he has plenty."

"Riches have been known to take to themselves wings," said the Countess. "I believe that the best thing that could happen to him would be to find himself compelled to earn his daily bread."

Helen did not now resent Hilda von Reutensee's frankly expressed opinion; she had, in a manner, laid aside the veil of her own reticence regarding her husband, because her consuming anxiety found relief in speech to this woman whom she truly loved, and in whose loyalty to herself she absolutely believed. Their friendship, though not of long standing, had been most satisfying and profitable to both. From the simple, pure fountain of Helen Woodgate's goodness, Hilda von Reutensee had taken many refreshing draughts; contact with a soul at once so strong, gentle, and womanly, had given to her a fresh glimpse of the nobility of human nature; and she loved her with a devotion which astonished herself. To Helen the companionship, at a critical period of her life, of a woman of the world, who had such experience as must either harden or ennoble, had proved invaluable. She had come to London a child in many things, steeped to the lips in simple country faiths, and disillusionment had been hard. Hilda von Reutensee had softened it for her, explaining apparent anomalies, and making rough places plain; applying her gay wisdom to the contradictions of human nature which so puzzled and perplexed Woodgate's wife. The unreality, the sordid and almost universal self-seeking of the circle in which they moved, had sunk into Helen's soul, filling it with pity and a vague distrust. Hilda von Reutensee had tried to explain to her that such self-seeking was inevitable amidst the overcrowding, the fearful competition, the bitter struggle for existence, which is nowhere more keenly felt than among the aspirants who find

new Grub Street scarcely less hard than the old. Woodgate regarded somewhat impatiently this close friendship between his wife and the woman he would have married in preference had circumstances permitted. It irritated him at times, because it was made evident to him that whatever interest the Countess had once felt in his prospects and career, it was now absolutely transferred to Helen, and that she only looked at him through Helen's eyes.

It was some time before he would admit this, and he regarded their friendship with cynicism, affecting to believe that it was impossible for two women to regard each other with a disinterested affection. They saw a great deal of each other, and had even now come to Brighton together to spend a little holiday, though there were some who, knowing the past, wondered that Helen Woodgate should so constantly throw her husband and the woman he had loved together. Then, you see, she knew nothing of the past; and she was not a woman to whom any dared drop a hint of what had been. Perhaps, then, the Countess was to blame; but she believed all danger past. She knew that Woodgate had once loved her, or imagined that he did, though she had never allowed him to show it. She had kept him at arms' length always, and had little to reproach herself with, certainly nothing since his marriage. She had marked the difference, and defined their relationship with the consummate skill of an exceedingly clever woman. She loved Helen dearly, and prized her friendship above everything on earth, save her boy's love; and she imagined that she might keep it—even with her friend's husband in the background, tiresomely remembering the days that had been.

Strong and absolutely true herself, she forgot the weakness of Woodgate's moral nature. So for twelve months the little comedy, which many watched with varying interest, played on till it reached the Rubicon, and tragedy took its place.

"I wish you would not wear so serious an air," she said, looking at the strong, grave outline of the womanly face by her side. "I do think you lay things too much to heart. You, who have so much faith in the higher Power, should be content

to wait. Someone has said, I think, that everything comes to those who wait."

"Yes, only at times it is hard to realise that. I do feel curiously depressed to-day, and I ought not in this fine bracing air within sight of the sea. But it always does me good to talk to you. What a tower of strength you have been to me during the last six months! I can never forget it or be grateful enough to you."

Under pretence of drawing her furs more closely about her neck, Hilda von Reutensee pressed her hand to her trembling lips. Her face, beautiful and haughty, was invested with a tenderness which none but her boy had ever seen upon it.

"Hush, hush! It is I who ought to be grateful, and I am. You have made me a better woman, more fit to be a mother to my son. Some day I will tell Gustav what you have been to me, and he will then reverence you as he has already begun to do. I only wish there were more women like you in London, in the society among which we move—there would be less tragedy, less heartbreak; but you may leaven the mass. There is nothing impossible to you with those eyes, clear as God's own heaven. You have strengthened many already, and will strengthen many more. I know what I am saying. With so much in your power, you should not dare to despond."

Helen long remembered those words, the last before their communion suffered so terrible an interruption. The story was commonplace in every detail, such as can be read any day in the newspapers; but as it happened, so it must be told. They were staying at one of the great hotels on the sea front, and shared a large drawing-room facing the sea. An inner room, which Woodgate used as a study, communicated with it by folding doors. The day after her talk on the pier with the Countess, Helen had occasion to go to town to see the family lawyer on some business connected with the winding-up of her father's estate. Woodgate offered to accompany her, but she did not think it necessary, and arranged to return by the six o'clock train. As it happened, the business was not complicated, and was settled in ample time to allow of her return early in

the afternoon. She was tired, and looked forward to an hour's rest before dinner. On inquiring for her husband at the hotel, she was informed that he and the Countess had gone out together after luncheon. Smiling to herself, and glad that they should not have missed her, she went, before going to her own room, to the study, to write a few lines to her sister. She had only headed the sheet when she heard the drawing-room door open and the sound of familiar voices. She was about to rise and surprise them when she was arrested by something Woodgate said. The words did not signify much; it was the subdued passion in his voice which struck Helen and made her feel powerless to move.

"Don't ring yet!" he said. "You have left me where I was. What do you mean by saying that I had never deserved success, and now less than ever?"

It was a theme in which Helen was intensely interested; she paused in silence for the reply, scarcely realising at the moment that she was listening to what was not intended for her ears. The next moment it became impossible for her to reveal herself.

"Why assume such a tragic manner?" the Countess asked, with a sarcastic and languid note in her voice. "It is not the first time I have bidden you be worthier of the noble woman you have married. She is even harder to please than I, and it ought to be your highest endeavour to reach the height she desires and expects you to reach."

Woodgate made a gesture of impatient dissent. Helen felt it though she could not see it, and her heart seemed to die within her.

"You ought to be the last, the very last, to speak so to me," he said harshly.

"Why?"

Very coolly Hilda von Reutensee put the question, not quite comprehending his meaning indeed, and very weary of his constant harping on one selfish string.

"Because you are the only inspiration I own, or have ever owned," he replied. "To make my work worthy your acceptance is all I care for, or have ever cared for, and you know it. What is she to me?"

CHAPTER XXIII

"And therewith such an agony did rend
Her body and soul, that all things she forgot
Amidst of it."

HUSH!"

Clear, sharp, incisive as a lance-thrust, Hilda von Reutensee's voice broke in upon the torrent of his words, and Helen, sitting behind the folding-doors, heard the rustle of her garments as she sprang to her feet.

"I will not hush—I will speak!" the man replied, allowing the flood-tide of his passion vent. "I love you with a mad love, which is my ruin. If I had married you, there is nothing I could not have achieved, and you know it too well. As it is, life is bitter to me as Dead Sea fruit."

"It was your own doing. Why oh, why, did you do her so irreparable a wrong?"

Her voice was shrill with her intolerable anguish. It was of Helen, of Helen alone, she thought.

"I was in a manner bound," he said gloomily. "I had to make some return for their long kindness, and there was no other way."

"None but that? O Heaven, these are the tender mercies of men! Do you know that to such a woman it would have been a greater kindness to have killed her? God forgive you, and be merciful to her!"

There was a moment's strained and dreadful silence. Then

the Countess spoke again more quietly, yet with a note of despair in her voice.

"I pass over the insult you have offered to me to-day, an insult I have not deserved. I pass it over for her sake. You know, none better, Richard Woodgate, that I have never encouraged you to care for me in that way, that I have been true to myself always, that I have never forgotten I am another man's wife and that I have a son who believes in and loves his mother. I have had a hard life, isolated always from my own sex, exposed to temptation which other women, as good as I am, have not been able to withstand. I have made some mistakes: one of them was to imagine I might make a friend of you. I have felt kindly towards you, I will not deny. I have been interested in your career, as I have been interested in a hundred others, but nothing more. As for you, I knew your weakness, that you longed for the adoration of every woman you knew, and laid yourself out to win it; but you did not win mine. I trembled when I heard you had married—trembled for her. But when I saw her I took courage, and said to myself, She will make a man of him. No; be still. Hear me to the end. It is my last word, and say it I will. You are baser, more hopeless than I thought, since the constant companionship of a soul scarcely fit for contact with this miserable world has failed to work in you the smallest good. You say you love me. Do you know that in saying that you have taken from me what is dearer to me than anything in this world except my boy—her friendship? I must now pass out of your life and hers for ever, and before I go I would pray you to try to be worthier of her—to seek to atone by lifelong devotion to her for what you have done this day."

Again Helen heard the swift rustle of her skirts and the opening and shutting of the door. She sat in silence, her elbows on the writing-table, her eyes staring straight before her, chaos in her soul. At any moment her husband might throw open the door and there find her, but she felt powerless to move. In a few minutes he also left the room, and Helen sat still; how long or how short a time she could not tell. At last

she herself rose, gathered her writing materials together, shutting the unfinished sheet into her case, and went upstairs. Absolutely for the moment she did not know what to do. It was now five o'clock. In her room, at the other end of the corridor, the Countess was sitting, trying to write a letter to account for her immediate departure from Brighton; while in the dressing-room her maid, in no small surprise, was packing her trunks. At the half-hour she had left the hotel. About the same hour, when Hilda von Reutensee's eyes were turned in the mute anguish of farewell towards her windows, Helen came to herself and suddenly took her resolve. She had no maid to aid her, but she needed none. Her preparations were not elaborate, nor would she burden herself with anything that was not absolutely necessary. Her life being over, as she thought, she had no further use for the dainty garments, the elegant trifles, which in happy days she had loved and worn. Her dressing-bag, the marriage gift of an old friend in the Dale, sufficed to carry the few things indispensable meanwhile till she had further planned. Having awakened to the fact that her husband had repudiated her, had no further need of her, her sole idea was to get away at once from any possibility of again looking on his face. Having packed her bag, put on her rich but plain travelling-cloak and her bonnet, all part of the deep mourning she still wore for her father, she stood still a moment in the middle of the room, looking perplexedly about her, as if wondering whether anything had been forgotten. Her face wore a scared, troubled look, her eyes were dazed, her mouth hard, stern, most pitifully drawn. She had begun to draw on her left-hand glove, when she suddenly observed her rings. Very deliberately she took them all off, laid the broad band of her wedding ring and its handsome diamond keeper beside it on the dressing-table. Then she replaced her mother's worn wedding ring and the mourning ring containing her father's hair side by side on the third finger, put on her gloves, and left the room. She met no one in the corridor or on the stairs, though a curious chamber-maid, seeing her go down bag in hand, called the attention of a neighbour to the fact. She

passed out of the hall also without a word of explanation to the porter, though he looked after her curiously too, and seemed on the point of speaking. As she passed on, however, he looked at the clock, and observed that it was a quarter to six.

About seven Woodgate returned to the hotel. He looked ill, and in his eyes there was a furtive uneasiness. The situation he felt to be awkward in the extreme, and he did not know how to face it. The porter, shrewd and suspicious after the manner of his kind, regarded him with curiosity also, feeling intuitively that something had gone wrong.

"Has Mrs. Woodgate returned from town, do you know?" Woodgate inquired, with an assumption of carelessness which did not in the least deceive the person addressed.

"Yes, sir. Mrs. Woodgate returned by the four o'clock. She went out again at a quarter to six, carrying her dressing-bag."

"Left any message?" inquired Woodgate, and he could not help his face reddening.

"No, sir, none. The Countess went to town by the five thirty-five, taking her maid and her luggage. That is all, sir. She said she had been unexpectedly called away."

"I knew that; but Mrs. Woodgate returned at four o'clock, you say. I was in the house then. How did I not see her?"

"Couldn't say, sir," replied the man, with a peculiar grin, feeling more and more convinced that something was up. "Perhaps madame may have left some message with the chamber-maid."

Woodgate nodded, and walked upstairs. The most horrible suspicions were awakened in him, and yet it seemed utterly unlikely that the Countess should have revealed to Helen the incident of the afternoon. That Helen might have overheard did not occur to him.

He met the chamber-maid in the corridor. She had been in the room Helen had just left, taking an inventory of things for herself. But she had not learned much; the rings lying on the table had not seemed of special significance to her, though she had wondered a little at the lady's unusual carelessness.

"Did Mrs. Woodgate say to you where she was going or when she would return?" he inquired, stopping her as she respectfully glided past.

"No, sir, she said nothing to me."

"Did she have any tea when she returned?"

"No, sir. I asked her, but she said she would take tea with you and the other lady when you returned, and she went down to the anteroom then to write some letters."

"The anteroom?" repeated Woodgate vaguely. "Do you mean the room behind our drawing-room?"

"Yes, sir."

"What time would it be when she went there?"

"About ten minutes past four, sir, and she came upstairs before five. She seemed very tired, sir, and I thought would go to lie down."

"Very probably," replied Woodgate steadily, and, passing the girl, entered the room and shut the door. The explanation was before him in all its simplicity. Helen had heard, and had gone away. The moment he entered the room, his eye was arrested by the gleam of the rings on the table. He took them up and looked at them with a curious twitching of the mouth. There they were, the pretty baubles—mutely offering him their message—a last farewell. It was an awful moment for the man, the complete wreck of all most men hold dear. I do him the justice to admit that his first thought was not of himself, but of her, of the woman from whom he had taken all, to whom given nothing. He glanced round the room, standing as Helen had stood little more than an hour ago; and, when he saw the open door of the wardrobe, the signs of hasty packing, sank down upon a chair, completely overcome. His remorse, his self-reproach were more than he could bear. The more he thought of Helen, the more intolerable did his thoughts become. If she had, as was, he feared, too evident, overheard the words he had addressed in a moment of passion to the Countess, then all was over. A bitter experience for any wife, it was one he felt sure which his wife would never forgive. Her own purity and uprightness of soul were so absolute and unsullied, that

she would look upon his disloyalty as too black for aught but utter condemnation. Even her love would be slain by it, so he bitterly told himself; and what remained for him or for her? He cursed the weak folly by which in one dark moment he had lost his wife and his friend.

He roused himself by and by, and began to wonder what he should do. He could think of nothing but his wife, and in his own mind he had no doubt of the course she had taken. He believed that she was already in London, awaiting the departure of the Scotch night train. He rose from his chair, began with a curious nervous haste to put the things scattered about the room into the wardrobe, which he locked and put the key in his pocket. Then he put the two rings in the inner pocket of his letter-case and went downstairs.

"I am going up to town for the night," he said to the porter. "My wife has been suddenly called away. I do not know when we shall be back. Meanwhile, I keep the rooms, and have left all our belongings in them. You will hear from me when to expect us back—or where to send our luggage if we should be unable to return."

He gave the man a sovereign, and stepped into the hansom at the door. He had to wait some time at the station, and when he reached Victoria, it was five minutes to ten o'clock. The Scotch train left Euston at 10.30; he had not much more than time to drive from one station to another, but he was in time. He went from one end of the train to the other, scanning each compartment without the smallest hesitation, but failed to find his wife or any trace of her. He stood on the platform till it steamed out of the station, then he turned on his heel and walked away, a miserable, fear-haunted man. What to do next was the problem. The house at Hampstead was open, the servants during the absence of their mistress being busy with the spring cleaning. He could not go there; the idea of the desolate, memory-haunted house was hateful to him. He sauntered out, with his hat drawn over his brows, into the light and bustle of Euston Road, and looked about him dazedly as if uncertain how or where to turn.

"Hansom, sir?" said a cabman suggestively, drawing up at the kerbstone in front of him. Woodgate looked relieved, jumped in, and gave the address of Hargreaves in Arundel Street. He looked out as they turned in off the Strand and saw a light burning in the journalist's window, indicating that he was at home, which was not usual at that hour. Woodgate went somewhat slowly upstairs, knocked heavily at the door, and followed hard upon his knock without waiting an invitation. Hargreaves was at work amid the usual litter of untidiness, the atmosphere, as usual, thick with tobacco smoke.

"Woodgate! Why, bless my soul, I thought you were at Brighton," he said, jumping up. "What are you doing here at eleven o'clock at night, and— But, man alive, something's up! What is it?"

"I've played the very devil this afternoon, Hargreaves, with everything. It's all up—I tell you, all up. Don't look at me like that."

The strain of the last four hours was now beginning to tell on Woodgate, and he became momentarily more excited. Hargreaves stared at him apprehensively for a full minute, not sure whether Woodgate had not gone off his head.

"I've got something to finish here, old chap; it's my chronic state," he said, trying to speak unconcernedly. "Take a chair, and keep cool for ten minutes. I won't be longer than that."

But the look of blank misery and despair on the face of the man before him arrested him, and put all thoughts of work out of his head. That something serious had happened was very evident, for Woodgate was ordinarily the coolest of human beings.

Woodgate took out his letter-case, opened it, and laid the two rings on the table, where they made a little flash of light.

"Do you see them?" he said. "That's all I've got left of the woman I called my wife."

CHAPTER XXIV

"So soon men's passion passes! yea, it sinks
Like foam into the troubled wave that bore it."



HARGREAVES only stared.

"What on earth do you mean?" he stammered at length.

"What I'm saying. My wife has left me. Heaven only knows where she is."

"But the cause?" said Hargreaves excitedly. "Why has she left you? What have you done to her?"

Woodgate got up and began to pace the room.

"Oh, it's a commonplace story, Harry. Can't you guess?"

Hargreaves may have had some faint idea, but he would not express it. After a minute or so Woodgate briefly related the occurrence of the afternoon, and turned to his friend for his opinion.

"I suppose you'll say I'm a brute and a cad," he said gloomily. "But there's something to be said on my side too."

"You're worse than either. You're a fool, Dick, and no man has a right to be a fool. Man, don't you know what you've thrown away, a pearl beyond all price? There isn't her like in all London. I have never met a woman half so noble, so womanly, so truly good."

"That's what's the matter with her. She's too good," said Woodgate, gloomily still. "Fact is, Hargreaves, chaps like us,

accustomed to all sorts and conditions of women, are not fit mates for angels, and the experiment is sure to fail."

Hargreaves' expression changed. A fine contempt curled his mouth, an honest indignation flashed in his honest eye.

"Don't make yourself any more contemptible than you can help," he said quickly. "I feel inclined at this moment to kick you downstairs; it would relieve my feelings and do you no harm. There is no use commenting any more on this miserable affair. What we've got to do is to find Mrs. Woodgate. Did it occur to you to go to the Scotch train?"

"I've just come from Euston. She didn't go by it; but, Hargreaves, suppose we found her at this moment, what then? Do you think she'd come back?"

"I don't know. No man can take his affidavit on a woman's action; but anyhow, aren't you anxious about her?"

Woodgate had grown much calmer, and already the thing was assuming a different aspect in his eyes.

"I'm not concerned regarding her immediate safety, if you mean that. She is not a person to do anything rashly, and she has plenty of money. But I would wish to avoid a scandal in these beastly newspapers if possible, and I think she would be of the same mind. She has always had a slavish fear of public comment on the private life of individuals. I know that, and it is my only chance."

"If that is your only one, you may let it go after the rest," said Hargreaves, his lip curling again. "In a crisis like this I am sure such a consideration would weigh less than nothing with her. Well, what are you going to do?"

"I don't know—must wait till to-morrow now," said Woodgate, a trifle forlornly. "You see it's near midnight. What would you advise?"

"I'm not in a position to advise anything. When a man's chum acts in such a totally unexpected and confoundingly brutal manner, it throws a man on his beam ends. What did you marry her for?"

Woodgate impatiently shook his head. "What do half the fellows marry for, Hargreaves? Because they want to

settle down, and they think the one they have chosen will do credit to their taste. I don't claim to be any better than my neighbours."

Hargreaves thrust his empty pipe savagely into his mouth. Nothing was to be got by quarrelling with Woodgate, but never had the honest soul been so tempted to lay hands on a man before.

"I don't know what you're made of, Dick; and I don't want to know. You've talked a lot since you came into this room, and you never let a word of sympathy or compassion for the unhappy woman you have so bitterly wronged fall from your lips."

Woodgate winced. He was far from feeling as callous as he appeared; it was remorse, indeed, that gave the sting to his bitterest words. But he was reserved, secretive to a degree; no man could say he had seen into Woodgate's heart. At bottom he was capable of deep and strong feeling, and he was at that moment quite as unhappy as he deserved to be.

"There's no use talking here, I suppose," he said, picking up his hat. "I'll go round to the Metropole for the night. Walk with me?"

"No, not to-night; I've got work to do, and that's midnight ringing," said Hargreaves coldly.

"All right, good-night. I'll look round in the morning. Don't go back on me entirely for this, Harry, and try to think I have a redeeming virtue left."

Hargreaves allowed him to go without saying another word, and he sat down with his empty pipe still in his mouth, like a person stunned. He opened the window by and by, and put his head out. It was a fine mild evening, the sky soft and lovely, dappling round the rising moon in soft masses; the stars shining steadily in the little rifts, like so many watchful eyes. Hargreaves was much upset. He had witnessed many shipwrecks on the sea of London life, had seen the swamping of many a matrimonial barque, but none had ever moved him like this. He felt a personal interest in it, the three being known to him so well. But it was upon Helen Woodgate his thoughts

dwelt most lingeringly and painfully; he felt as if the wrong had been done to a dear sister of his own. He had not seen her many times, but these had sufficed to rouse in him a tender and chivalrous regard towards the woman who seemed to him to stand upon a pedestal, to look at life from the loftiest height—through eyes that brooked no wrong because they had never known it. The action of the other woman, on whose loyalty he could have staked his life, he could not comprehend. He simply did not understand it, and he told himself that if to talk with her face to face before the close of another day would help him to a better understanding, it should be done. With Woodgate, he was simply and unfeignedly angry; he could scarcely think of him and keep calm. If the work Hargreaves had in hand were pressing, it was shamelessly neglected. He sat by the open window till the bell of St. Clement Danes rang two; then he closed it, lit his pipe, and continued to think of Helen Woodgate, of her alone. He was a man of the nicest discrimination, possessing a knowledge of human and of feminine nature most accurate and delicate. He could follow in thought the very workings of Helen's mind, and even shared the intolerable and righteous indignation in her heart. She had no part with complaisant wives who view such deviations on the part of their spouses with philosophy, and whose gospel is to avoid open scandal at any price; she had given herself absolutely; all or nothing, was her creed. Therefore the shock must have been terrific, the awakening most cruel. The mere dwelling upon it banished sleep from the eyes of Hargreaves, and the dawn found him lying on the hard couch, with his arms under his head, thinking still. Woodgate in his luxurious bedroom at the Metropole fared better; although his heart was heavy, sleep did not refuse to visit him, and he awoke in surprise to see the sunshine lying across his bed.

Before breakfast Hargreaves finished his neglected task, then had his bath, breakfasted, and went out. He had no sort of hesitation about his destination or his errand; he turned his face westward, walking all the way, and reached Park Lane before eleven o'clock, not knowing whether he should find the

Countess there, but if he should, determined not to leave without seeing her.

The man-servant looked at him, and shook his head.

"Yes, my mistress is here, sir, and downstairs, but she will not see anybody to-day. These is my horders, sir, very peremptory."

"Take her my name, my man, and say it is most important," said Hargreaves.

The man asked him to walk in, and did as he was bid. In a few minutes he returned to the hall, and requested Hargreaves to walk into the library, as his mistress would come to him presently. Hargreaves was not elated, but felt calmly satisfied. Had the Countess absolutely refused to see him, he felt that matters would be complicated still further. He had not long to wait. In less than five minutes the door opened and she came in, nodding to him gravely; and he noted the look of misery in her face.

"Good-morning. I suppose you have heard something, or you would not have come here. Sit down."

She spoke without the smallest embarrassment, but she did not sit down herself. She wore her morning gown still, a soft clinging robe of a heliotrope shade, with trimmings of white lace which matched the hue of her cheek. There was not a vestige of colour in her whole face.

"Woodgate came to me last night," replied Hargreaves bluntly. "His wife has gone away."

The Countess gave a great start, the colour leaped back to her face, and she bit her lips, while her hands nervously clenched.

"God forbid, Harry! God forbid! Did he crown his mad folly, then, by telling her?"

"No," said Hargreaves, with a curious dry look. "It was more commonplace than that. She was in the adjoining room—you will understand the situation better than I—and overheard."

She walked away from him to the window, where the tall spring flowers in the window-boxes nodded gaily to her, and

so stood with her back to him, in absolute silence, for some minutes. She was suffering acutely, and the seal of it was on her face.

"Will you be merciful, Harry, and tell me quickly all you know?" she said to him at last, but without looking round. "Remember what it means to me. Be as lenient with me as you can."

"There is very little to tell," said Hargreaves in the same dry, even voice, for the tragedy seemed to deepen as he witnessed the woman's silent suffering. "Mrs. Woodgate, having overheard, simply went away, leaving no message except such as her discarded wedding ring might convey. Woodgate does not know where she is, and it struck me—may I be forgiven if I misjudge him—that it did not cause him much concern."

She flung her hand down from her breast with a gesture which conveyed a contempt immeasurable and sublime. "Do not name him," she said harshly. Then suddenly her manner changed, and she turned to the man who had been her tried friend for so many years with a gesture of infinite and wistful pathos. "Do you, can you exonerate me? I have been in torture all night long. You are on the outside. You are wise, and your eyes see clearly always. Have I brought about this awful thing? Have you seen in me any lightness of behaviour towards him that could have caused so gratuitous an insult? Don't spare me. I want to know that—only be true with me."

"I have seen nothing. You cannot help your attractions, and you are altogether blameless. If he cared for you all along, the sin was his marrying another woman."

A little shiver of relief trembled over her, and she put her hand over her eyes a moment.

"I feel stronger now, and I thank you. You are the only man I have ever met to whom a woman may speak her mind without fear of being misunderstood. But now, what is to be done? How—how are we to help *her*?"

"That," said Hargreaves gravely, "I do not know."

"But we must try—you and I. I love her so, I would

willingly die for her. She has shown me the highest loveliness of womanhood, how lovely it is to be good; and yet I unwittingly have slain her. Do you think there is any possibility of a reunion?—that it would be possible for her ever to overlook?"

"I do not," replied Hargreaves frankly. "I confess that at this moment I see no hope at all. You see," he added, with a curious contraction of his brows, "a woman can always forgive if the suppliant is at her feet; but he is not that. I observed a touch of querulousness in him last night. I believe he thinks she has been needlessly wounded by a punctilio."

"If that is so, his punishment will not be lacking," she replied, and her eyes flashed; "but I can hardly believe in a selfishness so sublime. Surely her sweet influence must have left some impression on him, else must all sweet influence be a myth. Let us not be too hard upon him either, Harry, until we see."

She was very just, even in the midst of her keen pain. Hargreaves regarded her, if possible, with an increased access of respect.

"What is he?" he asked himself. "What is he to have disturbed the current of two women's lives—and such women?"

"Are you going to remain in town?" he asked at last.

"I don't know what to do, nor where to go. Until I hear something of her I can know no rest. What steps is he taking to-day?"

"I don't know; but I shall see him later in the day. He stayed at the Metropole last night."

"It is unlikely she would go to Scotland, I think. It would be worth your or his while to see the lawyer to-day—the Scotch lawyer, I mean, who came down from her native town to see her about her father's estate. She had an interview with him yesterday, I think, at the Inns of Court Hotel. If she left her husband deliberately, it is just possible that she may have sought his advice."

"What is his name?" asked Hargreaves, taking out his note-book.

"Hoddon."

"I'll tell Woodgate, and if necessary, see him myself," said Hargreaves, rising. "Meanwhile, I am glad I have seen you."

He looked at her steadily a moment, and saw that her eyes were dim.

"Take my advice, and don't let this thing crush you to the dust," he said kindly. "The law of eternal justice will surely yet bring order out of chaos, here as elsewhere, and the end may be better than the beginning."

She grasped his hand, and one great tear dropped upon it.

"Come to me again," she said falteringly. "Your belief in me, your honest friendship, saves me from despair."

CHAPTER XXV

"I have seen all the woes of men—pain, death,
Remorse, and worldly ruin; they are little
Weighed with the woe of woman when forsaken
By him she loved and trusted."

ALMOST from the first moment that she realised the full significance of what she had overheard, Helen had a fixed purpose in view. There was no alternative. Her dream was over; almost it seemed to her that life had ended with it. She wondered at her own composure, at the calmness with which she could face the situation, the precision with which she could weigh every detail. Her husband no longer loved her—had never loved her indeed; she had heard his own lips utter the dreadful truth with an intensity which admitted of no mistake or doubt, therefore she could no longer remain with him. To go away as fast and as far as possible must be her first concern.

At the railway station she took out her purse and counted its contents. It was well lined, she having drawn a considerable sum in London that very afternoon. Finding no train to London for two hours, she made inquiry regarding Newhaven, from which port she knew Continental boats sailed. Her inquiries were satisfactory, and just as Woodgate got into the train to convey him to London, she stepped aboard the packet which was to make the night passage to Dieppe. She would not sail till midnight, but no objection was, of course, made to

the solitary lady passenger getting aboard as soon as she arrived. It was a mild and lovely night, the true April softness in the sweet air, stars and moon visible through a mysterious filmy haze, resembling a bridal veil. When they steamed away from the wharf, Helen was still on deck, and both captain and crew regarded with some surprised interest the tall dark-robed figure, with the hood of her cloak drawn over her head, but she was quite oblivious of them. She paced to and fro the deck the night long, pausing occasionally at the ship's side to watch the long roll of the dark waves crested with the foam made by the paddle-wheels. In the lonely stillness of these weird night hours, the unhappy woman began to realise the intolerable nature of the wrong done to her, and her outraged heart began to beat tumultuously under its indignant load. She marvelled and trembled at the darkness of her own thoughts. Hate had been familiar to her as a word of dreadful import; as an experience and a reality she now made its acquaintance for the first time. Its dark shade seemed to stand between her and happiness, between her and heaven for ever. Far, far away seemed the early days of her happier youth, when she had dwelt untroubled in a home of peace, into which came only such things as were lovely and of good report.

She was now twenty-eight years old, and her disillusionment was complete. She looked upon life stripped of its every adornment, and saw it stretch before her an arid and desolate waste, whereon flourished no green thing. It was a frightful experience, which robbed Helen Woodgate of her youth for ever. Out of the depths she raised her eyes once or twice to the peaceful heavens, finding them for the first time dumb. Once the voiceless prayer rose to her lips: "My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?"

The dawn found her calm and worn, still pacing the deck; and then her attention was arrested by seeing the rose blush of the new day lying on the flat shore and the quaint roofs of Dieppe. This forced her to think, to plan further for the day on which she was thus cast desolate, to make or mar it as she willed. She took the train to Paris, arriving at St. Lazare at

nine o'clock. She feverishly drank a cup of coffee at the buffet, and then drove to the Rue de Strasburg, where she booked straight through to Würzburg. Something seemed to be calling her to the solitudes of the Francon pinewoods, where abode another woman for whom life was practically over. She had not slept for thirty hours, but her eyes were wide open and untired. She vaguely wondered when the blessed oblivion of that slumber which is death's twin sister would ever again visit them. She arrived at Würzburg late in the evening, so weak and spent that she remained at the hotel all night, and slept, without stirring or dreaming, for twelve hours. Next morning her brain was calm and clear, her vision undisturbed. She knew where she was the moment she was awake, and her desire and resolve to see the old Gräfin, whose bitter experience of life had so profoundly touched her, suffered no abatement. Nor did any misgiving as to her reception haunt her. There is a kinship in suffering; bonds forged in the dark days of life, which do not partake of the nature of ordinary experience.

Early in the forenoon Helen hired a carriage and took the now familiar way to Reutensee. It was an exquisite spring day, the sun shining with a subdued and tender radiance, the whole earth smiling, as it awakened to newness of life. The young leaves were downy on oak and beech and elm, tender green showing in fine contrast against the sombre hue of the pines. Helen remembered every landmark, every detail of their last journey through the solemn avenues of the pinewoods amid the drowsy sunshine of full summer-tide; it was not less lovely now, nor was she less conscious of it. Every sense was sharpened, every faculty keenly awake; not a gleam of light or throb escaped her eye. The first sense of restfulness came to her when she came within sight of the little village slumbering on the edge of its placid lake; old-world, quaint, far removed from the haunts of the busy world where tragedies abounded. Yet here also tragedy had come. She bade the man take her straight to the Schloss, and wait for her outside the gates. She had come without bidding and without warning, and it might be that the

lady she had come to see was absent. As she passed under the low arch of the gateway, the first object her eyes rested on was the boy Gustav sitting on a stone seat by the fountain, his sunny head bare, and his eyes fixed on a book in his hand. He heard her footfall, light though it was, on the stones, and sprang to his feet.

"Oh, madame," he cried, with a pretty salute, and his boyish face flushing with pleasure and surprise, "have you come again to Reutensee? You are very welcome indeed."

Had there been any hardness in Helen's thoughts of Hilda von Reutensee, they must have vanished at sight of the frank, open face of the boy who had her very eyes. He came to her and took her by the hand with that simple gladness an English lad would scarcely have shown, though he might have felt it; and he looked up into her face with his fresh young eyes, seeing that she looked tired and even somewhat ill, but suspecting nothing wrong.

"Your aunt, Gustav, is she at home?"

"Yes, madame; it is time for her coffee now. How glad she will be to see you! She has so often talked of you."

"And how are you here now, Gustav? I thought you were at school in Erlangen."

"Yes, madame, but it is Eastertide now. I came only yesterday. Have you come from England? and when did you see my mother?"

It was an ordeal of no common kind for Helen to answer these questions simply as they were put, but she put the curb upon herself, and, though growing pale under it, she answered naturally enough—

"I saw her only three days ago."

"And was she well? And did she say, madame, when she would come to Reutensee? It was twelve months yesterday since she left us here."

"She will not come, I think, till the summer, when you are to spend your holidays together."

"It is a long time," said the boy, and his face clouded.

"Strange, I had but written to her this morning, and the letter

has gone. Had I waited till evening, what a piece of news it would have been for her!"

He still kept her hand as they walked towards the house, and Helen returned its pressure, while some faint warmth began to steal about her heart. She had been desolate for three days, and human companionship, the touch of human kindness, seemed sweet.

"My aunt is in the salon now. You know the little salon; don't you smell the coffee? How glad she will be to see you!"

He took his hand from hers and bounded up the polished stair before her, and, after the boisterous way of youth, threw open the salon door.

"Oh, Aunt Clothilde, here is a guest—such a welcome guest! The English madame! Is it not delightful to see her again?"

The Gräfin got up hurriedly, and Helen stood within the door. She saw at once, with that keen intuition which seldom errs, that something grave indeed had happened to the English lady since they had last met.

"Yes, Gustav. Run now, my son; I shall call you later. Gretchen will give you coffee, perhaps, in her room, if you ask her nicely."

The boy at once withdrew. Helen stepped forward with an uneasy, questioning look in her face.

"Oh, I am in dire trouble!" she cried bitterly. "To you I have come—I do not know why. Let me stay; comfort me—my heart is broken!"

The dignity of the Gräfin melted away in a great wave of womanly tenderness, and her arms, most motherly in their touch, closed about the slender figure of the stricken woman, and she drew her head down upon her breast.

"There, my daughter, let it rest. Yes, yes; you shall tell me by and by, but not yet. You are stricken of God, I can see; yet will He in His mercy comfort you in His own good time."

She would not let her speak, but busied herself unfastening her cloak and her bonnet-strings, all with a touch so motherly, so indescribably caressing, that it carried healing with it.

Gradually the drawn look died out of Helen's haggard face,

the ineffable peace of the place seemed to lay a hush upon her spirit.

"You have travelled far and quickly, I can see," said the Gräfin. "No, you must not speak until you are rested and refreshed; there is no haste, we have time here for everything. It does not matter to us, and to such as you leisure is rest."

The coffee was brought, and Helen drank it gratefully, and broke bread too, feeling vaguely the need of it and the strength it gave. The Gräfin herself spoke almost continuously, and of a set purpose, of things commonplace, the boy and his education, the season of the year, the fine seed-time over which the village folks were rejoicing; and in this she was very wise. For, listening to her, lifted for the moment out of the one idea which had enthralled her during these three desolate days, calmness came to Helen, and she was at last able to tell her story, so that it could be at once understood. She told it briefly, and with a reserve characteristic of her; but the Gräfin, whose perceptions long seclusion from the world had by no means blunted, could fill up the spaces until the web was complete. And in her eyes, as she listened, a vast pity was enshrined. She saw the sharp chafing of a proud, sensitive spirit under the veil of that admirable reserve, the tumultuous and bitter heaving of a woman's heart outraged and wounded to the quick.

"It is a common tale, my daughter," said the elder woman with a heavy sigh. "It seems impossible at times to fix the wandering star of a man's faith; but your case may not be altogether hopeless. I would have you remember that men are not as we are. They are subject to whirlwinds of passion, which pass over them, leaving after a time scarcely a trace. It is possible this heavy cloud may yet pass from your life."

Helen emphatically shook her head. "It will never pass from mine. My faith is destroyed, and that is the end. You will let me remain here with you a little while, Gräfin, where nobody knows me or will ask me any questions; at least, until I can decide what I must do."

"You are welcome, my daughter, so long as you like to stay, and when Graf Ludwig comes to Reutensee, we can go, you and I together, to my own home in Thüringen, which is even more remote from the world than this."

Helen thanked her gratefully, and they talked on. One thing only Helen withheld—the name of the woman who had unconsciously wrought the evil in her life.

CHAPTER XXVI

“Even love itself is bitterness of soul.”

DON'T you think, Guy, that it's a long time since we heard from Helen?" inquired the mistress of Broadyards, as she poured out her lord and master's second cup of coffee at the breakfast-table one morning.

"Now that you speak of it, my woman, I think it is," replied Broadyards, lifting his eyes from his paper, which happened to be the current issue of the *Live Stock Journal*. Breakfast in that comfortable household was a very free-and-easy meal, the laird usually taking his literature with it, while his wife overhauled the contents of the letter-bag.

"I've only had one letter from her since she left us, and that was before they went to Brighton, nearly a month ago. Do you think she can be ill?"

"No, I don't think so, or Woodgate would have written. Brighton's a very gay place, you know, and no doubt she is up to her eyes in dissipation."

"Oh, Guy, you dreadful creature, to suggest such a thing! How can she possibly be indulging in dissipations and wearing deep mourning? Why, she ought not to go out at all to see anybody, except in the quietest way, for six months at least, though I must say it would not surprise me very much to hear something quite different. I am afraid Helen is very much changed."

"How? I thought her just the same, only nicer, when she was here," said Broadyards in mild surprise. "Have you written since she did?"

"Yes, twice, and never an answer. I am afraid I offended her when she was here."

"Offended her? What about? She was very kind to you when you were ill, and I was grateful to her, if you weren't," said Broadyards, with some reproach in his mild eyes.

"Oh, so I was; but sometimes we had talks and didn't agree."

"What kind of talks?"

"Oh, all sorts; but about babies chiefly."

Broadyards laid down his paper and regarded his wife fixedly.

"Annie, I hope you never made her feel that you were richer than her, because you had babies."

"Oh no, I don't think that, though I *am* disappointed, and I couldn't help showing it. I am quite sure Helen herself does not mind; she is not what you would call a very womanly or motherly woman," said Mrs. Douglas, with an air of great wisdom. "Baby darling, take your fists out of your milk, or you shall go upstairs to nursie. Oh no, I don't think that offended her at all; but I never could help something coming up my back when she spoke about Richard. It made me sick, quite sick sometimes; and after all the warnings I gave her."

"What on earth are you talking about? I'm quite at sea," said the laird, his interest divided between his wife's speech and the price of two-year-olds. "It was quite natural she should speak about him. I hope you'd sometimes think and speak about me if you were away from me"

"It would depend on how you had behaved just before I left you, sir," said the little woman, with that coquettish smile which had long ago made havoc of the laird's honest heart. "It was not the mere speaking, you silly boy, it was the way she spoke,—just the very way I always warned her against, as being so bad for a man, setting him on a pinnacle and kind of worshipping him. Just imagine what sort of a person you would be were I to treat you in any such manner."

"I can't imagine; but suppose you try the experiment, it would be a nice little change for me," said Broadyards, with a twinkle in his eye so irresistible that his little wife instantly jumped up and gave him a kiss, which caused little Guy to crow with delight, and rapturously churn in the milk-jug with his fist.

"Guy, I don't know what you deserve—certainly not this sort of treatment," she said, with another kiss. "Well, about Helen. I'll write to Richard to-day. I composed the letter in my bed this morning."

"When you ought to have been asleep. Dick would feel flattered, I am sure; at least, he ought, for I'm sure you never kept awake to compose a letter to me."

"No, that I never did, or I should never have married you. Well, when Helen sees I have written to Richard, I hope she'll feel reproved for her unsisterly conduct."

The letter was duly written and despatched that very day, and brought a reply by return of post, which fell like a thunderbolt on the peaceable house of Broadyards. It was from Woodgate, and ran in those curt, cold words:—

"DEAR MRS. DOUGLAS,—I have received your letter inquiring about your sister. She left me at Brighton, on the 8th of April, nearly three weeks ago, and till to-day I have supposed her to be in Scotland. I cannot give any explanation of the matter. We had no quarrel, but she must have exaggerated some slight circumstance, which she has as yet given me no opportunity of explaining. Nevertheless, I expect that she will ere long return to the home she has deserted.—I am, yours truly,

"RICHARD WOODGATE."

That letter, apparently so cool and heartless in tone, had nevertheless cost Woodgate a tremendous effort. He knew that he did not stand in very high favour at Broadyards, and that all blame would be attached without questioning to him. This certainly made him more brief, more brutally candid than

he might otherwise have been. Its effect on the Douglasses may be imagined, it cannot be described.

"Oh, Guy, Guy Douglas, what are we to do?" gasped the little lady hysterically. "To think that a sister of mine, a Lockhart, should have left her husband. Such a vulgar disgrace! We shall never be able to hold up our heads in the Dale again. Oh, it is dreadful! a thousand times worse than poor dear papa's death!"

Perhaps it was natural that the thought of the disgrace should be uppermost in Mrs. Douglas's mind. She was a shallow person, whose chief interests concentrated within the four walls of her own house. Anything that contributed to the furtherance or the glory of those interests was welcome and good, anything detrimental to them so bad that it could not be tolerated.

Broadyards looked deeper into the matter, and thought of the woman to whom this disgrace meant the tragedy of a life. "I could have sworn they were happy," he said, pulling his yellow moustache fiercely, while his red lips unsteadily quivered. "Do you think it possible that Helen may have gone a little wrong in her head, Annie? She was sometimes queer, and her health has not been so good lately."

Mrs. Douglas sank into a chair with a hysterical laugh.

"Don't be any sillier than you can help, Guy, for we need all our wits about us. There never was a saner woman than our Helen, and never will be in this world. No, no; you needn't try to shift the blame from the right shoulders; though, of course, men always stand up for each other. No, it was his fault: he has been unkind to her and has broken her heart. Not that I am a bit surprised—I always expected it; and, with all deference to you, Helen didn't appear to me when she was here to be a deliriously happy woman. You can't deceive a married woman."

"It's a bad business, my dear Annie, and upon my word, I don't know what's to be done. I think I'll go over to Broadrule and consult Brian. I'll just catch him before he goes out on his rounds."

"Gavin Douglas, if you dare!" cried his wife quite furiously. "You great stupid, don't you see we must keep it hidden as long as we can, till it comes right again, which I pray it will? Tell Brian, indeed! It is so dreadful, it dare not be spoken about. I would not have your mother know for anything. She thought I was not good enough for you before, what would she think now? She might even not leave Teviothead to Guy."

In the very face of his wife's distress Broadyards laughed, he could not help it. Then she became reproachful, and hysterically wept. Altogether it was a trying morning at Broadyards.

In the end it was arranged that they should go to London next morning, and that meantime nothing should be said to anybody. Broadyards was restless all day, thinking of Brian, and longing to get his opinion on the unhappy business. In the afternoon, about the time Brian usually came up the road, returning from his round, the laird went down to the lodge and hung about most suspiciously, in spite of all Annie had said.

About half-past three the gig came over the bridge, and Guy went down the road to meet it.

"Good-day," called Brian cheerily, and, taking a second look at his friend's face, he detected upon it a most unusual gravity.

"I wish you'd come down a minute, Brian. I want to speak to you."

Brian at once swung himself from his seat, bade his man drive slowly on, and turned to Guy apprehensively, but before he put the question it was answered.

"An awful trouble has come to us, Brian. Helen has left her husband."

Brian whitened to the lips, and his mouth became set like iron.

"Oh, impossible, Guy! it can't be true!"

"It is. Read that."

He handed Brian Woodgate's letter, over which he ran his eye in a moment.

"Good God, Guy, what a letter! The cold-blooded scoundrel! If I only had him here for two seconds, I'd ask no more."

His passion was at white heat. He strode across the road, with hands clenched, brows knit, and eyes flashing fire.

"What is to be done?" he asked hoarsely. "Nearly three weeks, and he has made no attempt apparently to find her. She may be dead!"

"Oh no, I don't think so. Helen was not that kind of woman," said Broadyards vaguely, half wishing he had not disobeyed his wife's peremptory orders. He had expected the aid of a cool, sensible advice, not the rage of a passion, righteous maybe, but terrible to see.

"Annie and I are going to London to-morrow. You can do nothing, Brian, but hold your tongue. You can do that, I hope?"

Brian remained silent, biting his lips. The wisdom of the advice went home. *He* had no right to interfere, his great love only made it the more imperative that he should take no action in the matter.

"I suppose I can, and must. It's long to wait, but you'll telegraph the result, Guy, directly you know it. You can easily make it obscure, but don't keep me waiting too long."

"You're taking on badly, Brian; I thought you'd got over it."

"I haven't forgotten her; and I say again what I said to you before, Brian: if Woodgate has behaved badly to Helen, he shall answer for it to me, right or no right. I made my vow, and I'll keep it."

Broadyards was considerably put out. After all, his wife was wiser than he. It had done no good to spread the news; so far as Brian was concerned, it had but kindled a fire which would be difficult to quench. He was a peaceable, easy-going person, who hated upheavals and scenes of any kind: seldom had he felt so uncomfortable as he did that afternoon walking up the avenue to his own house. As for Brian, he was totally unfit to attend to his work, and the old man fussed about him tenderly like a woman, fearing he was "in for" a fever or some other trouble. But who can minister to a mind diseased?

Next morning Mr. and Mrs. Douglas joined the London

train at Hallkirk, and reached Euston at half-past six. They had sent no intimation of their coming, and were even doubtful of finding Woodgate at the house at Hampstead. They were relieved to find it open, and apparently inhabited, looking its loveliest, too, in the sweet dusk of the early spring. Woodgate at his study window saw them come, and was not surprised. He was in a sense ready for them, and did not keep them waiting very long. These few minutes, however, sufficed for the mistress of Broadyards to take an inventory of the spacious, well-appointed, and most artistic drawing-room, and to convince her that in her home Helen had certainly possessed all the outward attributes a woman could desire.

When her brother-in-law came into the room, looking handsome and even distinguished in his brown velvet coat, she stood up before him without any greeting, like a little tragedy queen.

"We got your dreadful letter," she said shrilly; "and we have come, my husband and I, to ask what you have done with Helen."

The extreme anxiety of the past weeks had told on Woodgate; he looked thin, and even haggard, a miserable, memory-haunted man; but the attitude of his wife's kindred somehow roused all that was worst in him, and he would not betray the smallest concern.

"I told you all there is to tell—all I myself know," he said coolly, but a close observer would have detected the extreme nervousness he tried so hard to hide. "Helen has gone away, and I have not yet learned her whereabouts, though I have many persons searching for her."

"You must have been cruel to the poor darling before she would take such a desperate step," cried Mrs. Douglas angrily. "None of us wished her to marry you; we all knew it would turn out badly; and, of course, you only waited till poor papa was gone to reveal yourself in your true colours; but remember I am alive, and Guy will punish you for your wickedness, and make you give an account of the whole unhappy business."

Woodgate became very white, his lips thin, his nostrils dilated, and he turned quickly to Broadyards. "Douglas, I ask you to try and bridle your wife's tongue, it is past my endurance. I have told you all there is to tell. It is superfluous to express my anxiety, my regret; they will not be accepted. Is there any use prolonging this interview?"

Fortunately at the moment Mrs Douglas took a violent fit of hysterics, and no more could be said. The carriage in which they had come from the station still stood at the door, and the moment she grew calmer, Broadyards took her down to it, and drove her back to the Euston Hotel, saying curtly to Woodgate he would see him next day. Just as they left, a special messenger brought a letter to the house for Mr. Woodgate. It was from one of the detectives, saying Mrs. Woodgate had been traced to Germany, and was now living at the Schloss of Reutensee.

CHAPTER XXVII

"Farewell! lest of mine eyes thou should'st have more to tell
Than now thou hast."



SHALL never be right, dad, till I've had a holiday. My nose has been at the grindstone for five years without a break. I've made all my arrangements, and there's a man coming from Edinburgh on Monday to take my place."

This announcement Brian made quite suddenly one morning, taking the old man completely by surprise. Brian was shrewd, and knew this was his only plan. Had he broached the subject before making arrangements, he would certainly have been talked out of it. The old doctor looked very hard at his son, and munched his dry toast in ominous silence.

"Out with it, dad; I've a broad back and can stand it," said Brian, with a faint reflection of his old merry smile.

"If you think you need it, I suppose I shouldn't say anything," said the old man then with extreme dryness. "But at your age I had no such word as holiday in my vocabulary. I had only three days for my wedding trip, long enough to tear over to Ireland and bring your mother back. Thirteen years after that I went to the Medical Congress at Birmingham, and plenty grumbling there was over that."

"Times are changed since then," was Brian's answer. "I must have this holiday, and I mean to take it."

‘Very well. Perhaps you’ll kindly tell me who’s coming here, seeing I have to suffer the infliction. A University man, I hope; I won’t have any quacks here.’

‘Oh, the man’s all right. Grierson is his name, an M.B., and with no end of certificates from Vienna and Berlin—where he has spent the winter.’

Having recovered his equanimity, the old doctor now became like a child in anticipation of a new toy, and could talk of nothing but the new man coming on Monday. It touched Brian inexpressibly and sadly, because it indicated the gradual but sure decay of the mental powers which had once been so vigorous and fruitful. But this childish interest in the change had its advantage, for it prevented him inquiring too closely into Brian’s reason for wishing a holiday.

The domestic upheaval in the Woodgate household had been well kept in the dark by the three who knew the secret. The Douglasses returned to Broadyards scarcely wiser than when they left, though in the course of a few days Woodgate did send a formal note to Guy informing him of Helen’s whereabouts. This, however, Guy did not mention to Brian; remembering the first explosion, he hesitated to risk a second. Nor did Brian make a confidant of his old friend regarding the immediate object and intention of his journey, though there was no sort of uncertainty about his plans. He went straight to London, made certain inquiries concerning Woodgate and his present manner of life, and then went on, travelling by the most direct and rapid route to Würzburg.

There was something more in the man’s mind than a vague desire to see with his own eyes the place where Helen had been apparently so happy, from which she had sent such sweet, interesting letters; there existed also the hope, growing hourly into conviction, that he would there find her. He had no sort of ground for the supposition, nor was he a man who gave, at any time, the rein to imagination; he took the journey quite calmly and methodically, as if it were a foregone conclusion that at Reutensee he and Helen should meet.

He arrived at the little inn in the quaint old village late in

the afternoon, and when he saw it, it all appeared so familiar that he almost felt that he must have visited it before. Helen's sketch-book, which Mr. Lockhart had exhibited with so much pride and pleasure, as well as the "bits" he had sometimes read from her letters to two interested listeners in the doctor's "den," of course accounted for this odd sense of acquaintance with the place. Over his simple meal Brian entered into conversation with the garrulous landlord, and though Brian found his German a trifle rusty, he managed to extract from his host the fact that an English lady was the guest of the Gräfin at the Schloss. Although he had felt sure he was on the right track, the knowledge that Helen was so near him now made Brian somewhat nervous and uncomfortable. He began to question the wisdom of his hasty act, and even to contemplate an immediate return without looking on her face. After all, he had no right, absolutely none, to pursue her, or even to offer her the smallest consolation in her trouble. He smoked his pipe for one solitary and contemplative hour in the orchard behind the inn, and from the leafy arbour, in which Helen had so often sat with book or work a year ago, he could see on the farther side of the shimmering lake the grey battlements of the Schloss crowning the height—their sombre outline rendered soft and lovely by the clinging sprays of the "ivy green." At the end of the hour he strolled out of the orchard and took the grassy path skirting the end of the lake, and which brought him at length to the pine-covered hill which the castle crowned. He walked very slowly, lingering often to admire the pensive beauty of the scene; the clear and delicate stillness, unbroken even by the flutter of a wild bird on the wing, seemed to lay a hush upon his spirit. The fret and the fever of the past few days seemed to fall from him like a garment for which he had no further need, and he felt as if he had come to a world where only peace abounded. In this mood he entered the sombre shadows of the pinewood,—where the footfall gave back no sound, and the air was laden with the health-giving and delicious aroma of the pines. Suddenly he emerged once more into the light, upon a bare hillside which Helen had always loved

because it had somehow reminded her of home, and there she was, standing solitary among the green heather tops, leaning against the bleached trunk of a gnarled and twisted birch tree, her figure showing a very slender outline against the delicate clearness of the air.

The woman Brian Laidlaw had loved and lost! In his emotion he was fain to hide himself a moment behind a friendly tree, from which he could, however, look upon her face. It was turned away from him and slightly upraised, as if it might appeal to the exquisite loveliness of the evening sky. She was not much changed: the profile was, perhaps, a trifle more sharply outlined than of yore, the figure more slender than he remembered it, but the hue of health was on her cheek, and her attitude betrayed no languor. The intensity of that look must, I think, have communicated itself in some subtle fashion to the woman who was the object of it, for she gave suddenly a little start of surprise, and turned her head. Brian stepped out of the shadow, and their eyes met. In a moment he was at her side.

"It is you, *you!*" was all she said. No greeting of any kind passed between them, but she became deadly pale, and trembled violently, as she leaned heavily against the tree.

"Helen, forgive me!" cried Brian in a troubled voice, for he saw he had made a mistake. "I thought the time had come that you might need a friend. You remember you did not deny me the privilege."

She shook her head, remaining silent. The awkwardness of the moment dwelt with them both. Again Brian told himself he had made a gigantic mistake.

"I appreciate your willingness to help me," she forced herself to say at length. "But it is quite vain, and you must know it. How did you know to come here? Did my sister tell you?"

"No. I am not aware that they know you are here. I came on a chance, which I felt to be a certainty. Uncertainty I could no longer endure."

"I hope," said Helen, with the faintest, most dreary smile, "that they are very well at Broadyards"—

"Quite well, but anxious, of course. I think, whatever transpires, you might write to Mrs. Douglas. The suspense is hard upon her and Guy."

"I will write. I did not think. I have been selfish, perhaps, but there is some excuse."

She looked him straightly in the face as she spoke, the face of a good man and true, who would betray no trust reposed in him.

Had Brian Laidlaw's love been a less pure and unselfish quality, that look, so full of pathos, of mute appeal, must have opened the very floodgates of his passion. He bit his lip, his eye grew wet with a stinging moisture, the colour rose high to his brow.

"Helen! Helen! you are bidding me leave you with that look," he cried passionately. "But I cannot go like this; I must know how it is with you, and what the end will be. Such poor satisfaction you will not deny me for the sake of the old days, and those who are away."

"It is with me—as you see," she made reply, almost in a whisper. "How it will end I know not. I made a mistake, that is all, and by its consequences I must abide."

"Is there no possibility of its being righted? Will you not return to your husband? He seems to expect it."

"No."

Decisive, clear, and cold fell that monosyllable from her compressed lips.

"What, then, is to become of you? It is impossible you can remain here. Your life has to be lived—how?"

"I don't know—I wait—something will happen," she said with difficulty, for the strain upon her was very great. "If one waits long enough, there is always a way. The Gräfin says so; and she has been this way before me. Meantime, she permits me to remain with her, and I have found at least the semblance of peace. Good-bye, Brian. I will write to my sister to-night."

Brian turned his head away. He was only a man—and hot Irish blood coursed in his veins. It was a superhuman effort

for him to keep the curb on himself. But he dared not add to the burden already too heavy for her to bear. Never had she so stood in need of his reverence, his sympathy, his help, as now. But how to offer it? What could he do? He stood before her baffled: nor did she help him at all. Again the silence became oppressive, and the two lonely figures on the bare hillside, face to face with the tragedy of life, had no word to say.

Yet the stillness was not quite unbroken. In the thicket a bird called sleepily to its mate, the branches creaked where the wood-gatherers were at work, and in the road below an oxen waggon lumbered heavily along. A solitary woman sat in it, grasping the reins tightly in her sunburned, rugged hands. The red kerchief tightly bound across her brow threw out the strong, harsh outline of her face, her expression betrayed nothing but a stolid, passionless calm. The village slept by the shimmering lake, the sunset glory bathing it tenderly, converting even the long lean outline of the church into a thing of loveliness and grace; and all about them the pinewoods stretched, a vast and melancholy sea—until the blue Franconian mountains hemmed them in.

"Is it not lovely here?" asked Helen dreamily, as she gathered her black skirts in her hand. "One wonders no more at the passion of her children for the Fatherland."

Brian made an impatient gesture with his hand.

"What is the place, or its people, to me? It is you I want to hear of, you alone. Are you going now—and shall I see you no more?"

She gravely nodded.

"You have called yourself my friend—so you will understand. I thank you for coming; it has comforted me. When you are gone, it will comfort me yet more to know that I am not forgotten."

A thousand bitter impassioned words sprang to Brian's lips but Helen arrested them, turning to him with a sudden change of demeanour, and a slight, faintly mocking smile on her lips.

"Will you tell me what they are saying of us in England

It is a new sensation for them, is it not? What is the popular version?"

"They say, what I suppose is the truth, that you parted from your husband because of the Countess."

"It is true and yet not true; it is redeemed from the vulgar and the commonplace by one fact, that she still possesses my regard and esteem. For what has happened, he and he alone is to blame. Let them know that."

Brian looked surprised. She spoke with so much earnestness and passion.

"Will you pass through London as you return?" she asked then.

"I expect so."

"I will put your friendship to the test, then, Brian. Will you see two people for me there?"

"Not Woodgate, Helen. Even for you I could not do that."

"I did not mention his name," she said quickly. "If you have time, and still desire to do me a service, go to the Countess von Reutensee,—she lives in Park Lane,—and tell her you have seen me; that I am well, and not quite crushed; above all, that her boy has comforted me. Then go to Norfolk Street and find Walcot Hargreaves. He will be glad to have news of me—and he will tell you anything you may wish to know. Now good-bye."

This time she dismissed him peremptorily, and when he hesitated to take her offered hand, feeling that he could not so leave her, she slightly waved it, and walked away. Nor did he dare to follow or to call her back. There was a majesty in her bearing, a distant dignity which seemed to mark an unmeasurable gulf between them. When the shadows of the wood hid her, Brian flung himself on the ground her feet had so lately pressed, and did battle with his pain. The hopelessness of the case crushed him to the dust. He had come so full of sympathy, feeling strong to aid her, and lo! she had shut him out; and, while not despising his honest friendship, had shown him that hers was a grief with which

even a friend may not meddle. He did not dream how the meeting with him had stirred her heart, how it had brought home to her, in one great sweep, the frightful humiliation of her position. She was walking toward the old gateway with her head bent in deep dejection, and her hands clasped before her, when the boy Gustav, always on the watch for the sweet English lady, came running to her side, and took her hand in his in that simple fashion which might have seemed childish in another.

"Oh, madame, aunt bade me look for you. She thinks you wander too much alone. May I walk with you?"

She raised her eyes swimming in tears to the fresh boyish face, and clasped close the warm young hand in hers.

"Gustav, some day you will be a man, and you will understand some things you do not know now. Now you are little more than a child, but you have not yet parted with the wisdom of childhood. Tell me, when a human heart feels crushed to the earth, and hope is dead, how is life to be lived?"

The boy looked perplexed, and her tears caused his own eyes to fill.

"Madame, I don't know; but always there is God, who knows everything. It is a great thought, Aunt Clothilde says, which should never fail to comfort us," he answered; then, seeing her attention was his, he added, in his quaint, simple manner, "Then it will not last always—I mean if we are unhappy. It can only be for a little time, then we are happy again, and forget."

CHAPTER XXVIII

"She did most mischief
Where she meant most love."

HAVING seen Helen, and obtained even so slight a commission from her, there was nothing to keep Brian in Reutensee. He left next morning, and travelled as he had come, without stoppage, arriving in London on the evening of the second day. He dined at the Charing Cross Hotel, and after sundown walked along the Strand to Norfolk Street, in search of Walcot Hargreaves, but found that he was dining out, and would probably not be home much before midnight. It was now nearly nine, not quite a suitable hour to make a first call on a lady, but the circumstances were exceptional, and after a brief hesitation, he jumped into a hansom and gave the address of the Countess von Reutensee in Park Lane.

The Countess had dined in company with Sophia Ryder, and the two were talking over the coffee when the servant brought Brian's name. She took it languidly, but when she read the name,

BRIAN LAIDLAW, M.D.

Broadrule, Hallkirk,
N.B.

her manner changed. She had heard his name from Helen Woodgate, and she wondered what this visit might portend.

"Tell the gentleman I shall see him presently, Barrett," she

said carelessly, and passed the card to Sophia Ryder, who formed her mouth into a curious contraction of surprise when she read it.

"This is a friend of Mrs. Woodgate's," she said at once. "I have seen his photograph at their house. He is a man, Countess, as steady and reliable as one of his own mountains. But what can he want with you?"

The little story-writer was admitted to a very close intimacy with Hilda von Reutensee, but the Woodgate affair had never been discussed between them. It is not to be expected, however, that the voluble and outspoken Sophia had held her tongue about it elsewhere; and she had almost decided to make Woodgate the villain of her next story. His lordly demeanour towards the little story-writer, for whom he entertained a species of good-natured contempt, had not commended him to her good graces, and she had long ago delivered herself of a frank expression of opinion regarding him. She, in common with the rest of the world, had been left to surmise the cause of the disaster in the Woodgate household, but she had no doubt where to fix the blame; and she had a hard time of it, at the club and other haunts, standing up for the Countess, for whom she fought boldly, though in total ignorance as to her real share in the catastrophe.

And she did wish she knew the ins and outs of the story, not from any mere motive of curiosity, but in order to justify her own absolute loyalty; but the Countess, of course, was the very last person to be questioned regarding so delicate an affair, to which she had never even remotely alluded.

"Yes, he is a friend of Mrs. Woodgate's, Sophia," said the Countess, rising somewhat hurriedly and with an unusual flush in her cheek, which betrayed an inward agitation. "And I wonder very much what he can possibly want with me. You will excuse me. I shall not leave you longer than I can help."

"Pray don't hurry or apologise for anything. If I can't amuse myself here for a whole evening if necessary, then I am a poor creature indeed," she said, with an expressive glance

round the lovely room, which she had described in every one of her novels, till all her readers knew it by heart. She thought, as the Countess left the room, that she had never seen her look more lovely or more regal. She wore a gown of rich black silk, profusely trimmed with jet, close fitting to the neck, and unrelieved by a touch of colour or scrap of jewellery.

"If he's come in the rôle of avenging spirit, he'll be disarmed," said the little story-writer. "Oh dear, oh dear! if only I could be invisible, it would be such a help to witness a bit of genuine tragedy from real life, instead of having to imagine it all the time."

The genuine tragedy, so far as the couple downstairs were concerned, was a very simple affair, betraying nothing exciting to the casual eye. Brian Laidlaw was standing by the Countess's *escritoire* in the square window when she entered; greeting him with a slight bow, and glancing from him to the pasteboard in her hand, with a suggestion of inquiry, to which Brian at once responded.

"I am a stranger to you, madam," he said; and the Countess liked the strong, even harsh, utterance of his voice; it seemed to suggest strength; "but I am here at the request of a lady whom we both know, Mrs. Woodgate." She bowed again, and waved him to a chair.

"Will you not sit down?" she said; and he noted in his turn the exquisite cadence of her voice, just as he had noted, at her entrance, the striking beauty of her face. "Have you then seen Mrs. Woodgate?"

"I have; I returned only this evening from abroad."

It was an awkward moment for them both, the theme of their talk being one of extreme delicacy. The Countess cast one rapid, searching glance at the Scotchman's honest face, and then spoke out to him frankly, as she might have spoken to Walcot Hargreaves, but no other. In the circumstances it was the only course to adopt.

"Tell me how she is. Did she send me any message? I do not know how I have remained in England when I knew where she was. Tell me what she said."

She spoke with an emotion which communicated itself at once to Brian. For two days he had puzzled himself over the attitude of Helen towards this woman, an attitude which appeared to him at once inexplicable and impossible; but now he understood. He saw truth written in every lineament of Hilda von Reutensee's face, anxiety in her eye, keen anguish in the tones of her voice. The shipwreck of another woman's life had not been deliberately planned and wrought by her, and she now deplored it with her whole soul. There were more things in heaven and earth than Brian had yet dreamed of in his philosophy, and life was more complicated than he had yet imagined it to be.

"She bade me tell you she was well, that she was not quite crushed, and that your boy had been a comfort to her," repeated Brian, simply delivering his message without adornment or comment of his own.

Hilda von Reutensee sat down suddenly and covered her face with her hands, and he saw two great tears force themselves between her fingers. He took a turn across the room. The sight of a woman's tears was intolerable to him, and she was a stranger to him. Then she had, if unwillingly, yet surely, destroyed the peace of one dearer to him than life; he was but a man, and though she had in a manner disarmed him, he could not altogether forget that stern fact. She became conscious of his restlessness, and looked at him suddenly with the passing shadow of a smile.

"You are not sure whether I am acting or not, Dr. Laidlaw. Nevertheless, I ask you to believe that my regret, my sorrow, is sincere. That she believes it, is the only sweet drop in this bitter cup. You are her friend, I know—will you deign to discuss this matter from its most practical and imperative standpoint? What is her state of mind? Is reconciliation possible?"

"With him, do you mean?" asked Brian, with a lightning glance, which showed another and a stronger side of his character.

"Yes."

"No; not probable, nor even possible in her present state of mind."

She rose then, her agitation becoming difficult to control.

"Doctor Laidlaw, it must be made possible. Perhaps you do not know what life is to a woman who lives apart from her husband. Be she as innocent as an unborn babe, it is cruel as the grave to her. I know because I have suffered it. I am suffering it now. Anything is preferable to it. She must return to him."

"Another woman might; she never will," said Brian emphatically. "If you have been admitted to her intimacy, you should know her views on such questions, and how difficult, nay, impossible, it is for such a truthful nature to restore a shattered faith."

"I know all that, oh yes, much better than you can tell me," cried the Countess quickly. "But I know other things as well. I am a woman of the world. I have lived in it. I know it well; and though my married life was as unhappy as it could possibly be, I regret—yes, I say I regret that I willingly gave it up. A lonely woman, withdrawn from her husband's protection, even though it be little more than a name, is an object for the pity of heaven. Helen is so constituted that she will acutely feel the coldness of the world, which blindly blames the woman always, and has no mercy upon her. I would save her from it if I could, she is so innocent of evil, so ignorant of the laws which govern society—the laws made, and rigidly kept too, by women who pretend to have hearts, but who are made of stone."

Brian was silent, moved by her eloquence and her truth. Her words were but a bitter confirmation of his own views, and he knew that even yet Helen had not awakened to the full bitterness and peril of her situation.

"Have you—have you"—he said, and hesitated a moment, then blurted out his question with characteristic bluntness, "Have you seen Woodgate?"

"I have not," she replied in a voice cold as ice.

"The first attempt at reconciliation must of course come from him, supposing it to be a possibility, which I doubt. So far as I am aware, he has not even attempted to communi-

cate with his wife; and when his brother-in-law saw him, his attitude, to put it mildly, was not promising."

"There is only one man in London who can find out his state of mind, and who has any influence over him, and that is Walcot Hargreaves."

"Mrs. Woodgate commissioned me to see him also," said Brian quickly. "I have already called, but did not find him at home."

"He is in town, however, and you may see him to-morrow. It may seem strange to you, Dr. Laidlaw, that I should speak so frankly to you, that I should continue to urge so passionately one course. But I know of what I am speaking, and I would fain hope, for the credit of humanity, that Woodgate is already in soul at his wife's feet. I do not, of course, know what your experience has been; possibly you do not know any more than she knew the extreme laxness of London society. There are many wives who would have laughed at the whole thing, and passed it over as one of the inevitables of life. Yes, I know what you would say: these are women who stand upon a lower plane, who lower the whole tone of life. I admit it all. But I still think that Helen should not abandon him for one fault; and I believe, as I have always told her, that she, and she alone, possesses the power to rouse in him all that is good."

Brian's lip curled in a fine scorn. "He has had her at his side for a year and a half, the fruits are not encouraging," he said drily; forgetting, in the extreme relief of talking the unhappy business over, that he talked to the woman who had caused it.

"I grant you ground for what you say, but I keep my belief, which I pray I may live to see justified."

Brian felt that there was no more to say, and made a move to go.

The Countess walked with him to the door, out into the hall; thinking, as she looked at his strong, rugged, trust-inspiring face that he belonged to a different race from the pigmies whose manhood after all was such a meagre

quality, lacking in its first essential, strength of body and of mind.

"Good-bye, madam. I thank you for your courtesy," he said, and offered his hand.

"Nay, it is I from whom thanks are due," she said, with a slight, sad smile. "It may be that we shall yet meet in happier circumstances; till then I am grateful, because you have lifted me above the contempt I have had heaped upon me lately, and which it is at times so hard to feel is not deserved."

"Since you have won her regard, madam, contempt cannot touch you," he said, and gave her hand the honest grip of friendship, which sent the blood to her very finger-tips.

If Sophia Ryder were devoured with curiosity, she hid it well. She merely glanced up from her book when the Countess entered the room, and, seeing her expression, decided not to speak.

"You were right about the Scotchman, Sophia," she said, after a long interval. "He is the man who ought to have been husband to Helen Woodgate. Well, you were telling me about Larry's scrape with the fifth form. What happened after the champagne bottles were discovered in the dormitory, and how did he escape being expelled?"

The little story-writer swallowed her disappointment, and continued her moving tale of Larry's woes at Harrow School.

CHAPTER XXIX

"What she felt the while must I think
Love's so different with us men."

THAT night was the monthly meeting of the Parthenon Club at the Albion Restaurant; and they sat down seven at table, the eighth chair, usually occupied by Woodgate, being empty. But before the soup-plates were removed, the door opened and he appeared, calm, nonchalant, smiling, with a gay apology on his lips, and a debonair greeting for all.

His appearance caused a little flutter of surprise, it being now universally known that he was under a domestic cloud. For a moment there was a marked restraint in the demeanour of the seven, until they remembered, as one man, that they had met as brothers of the pen, not as censors of private conduct.

Then how many, after all, could point to an absolutely clean record? Not one, save, perhaps, Walcot Hargreaves, whose name, encased though it was with the richest Bohemian eccentricity, no breath of personal reproach had ever stained. Woodgate, sensitive to a degree at the moment, felt the momentary breath of ice freeze the atmosphere, and his face fell as he took his place; nor could the immediate cordiality of the greeting accorded to him for some time put him at his ease. Now, Hargreaves, who had brooded with more or less

constancy upon the Woodgate affair, had been obliged to treat it as a conundrum and give it up. Keen student of human nature though he was, as well as Woodgate's most intimate friend, he had not been able to fathom that person's mind, and had never betrayed him into any expression of regret for the sad destruction of his domestic peace. Yet was he by no means inclined to credit the man with a total lack of feeling; observing him, even at the present moment, with a lynx eye, he detected a covert uneasiness, a heaviness of soul beneath the exterior, which was certainly touched with a slight defiance. And his private conjecture was, how long this mask would be sustained, how long before the fire would leap out, the chaos of restlessness within develop into some manly action. Woodgate was, when so moved, a brilliant, if slightly superficial talker, and he that evening excelled all precedent. He was the gayest of the gay, and Hargreaves, more than usually silent, watched him yet more keenly from under his grave, dark brows, and saw that a change was not far off.

The immediate object of the Parthenon gatherings was the submission of new productions before that select tribunal, the reading of unpublished tale or verse, which passed the judgment of the critical seven, before being submitted to the public.

It was long since Woodgate had contributed any share to the evening's after-dinner entertainment, but on account of brilliant past favours, had not been ignominiously rebuked.

The contribution for that evening fell to the lot of Ivan Radovski, a young Pole, lately admitted to the restricted ranks of the Parthenon, and one of the most brilliant of the younger generation. He read a short story, bearing upon the wrongs of his unhappy country; a gloomy, passionate, tragical conception, yet so full of power and pathos, that it carried his listeners irresistibly as on the waves of a great flood. He told it well too, and with a subdued but dramatic intensity, which betrayed the wound in the exile's heart. It left a deep impression on those present, and was received almost in silence. The criticism and comment so freely bestowed on pieces of

lighter calibre were not offered; the verdict was, that the thing was beyond criticism, being perfect of its kind. The dinner-table was duller than usual, the usual after-dinner badinage desultory and evidently forced. The evening was felt to have been somewhat heavy and sombre, nor was there much inclination to prolong it beyond eleven o'clock. The first move to break up had been made, when Woodgate slowly rose to his feet. His face was observed to be unusually flushed, but before he opened his mouth the colour receded until he became paler than his wont.

He drew a folded sheet of foolscap from his pocket, glanced inquiringly at Hargreaves, who occupied the chair, and cleared his throat.

"I have not for some time done my part at this table," he said in a low, but calm, evenly-modulated voice. "It is growing late, but I crave your indulgence for other ten minutes."

They waited, breathless, for what was to come. Whatever its nature, it was short, occupying only one side of the sheet. To the amazement of all, the contribution was a poem dealing with the sad pilgrimage of Love upon the earth; allegorical in conception, and told in impassioned language, touched with the spirit of the true poetry. He read it quietly, yet with a suppressed passion which communicated itself subtly to those who listened, and made many wonder.

When he finished, he folded it up and looked at them calmly.

"I await your criticism," he said, but none was forthcoming. Hargreaves spoke first.

"I think it will be the opinion of all at this table, when I say that there has been nothing more touching read at this table; and, further, that the author of *Firstfruits* and *Brune-hilde* has not forgotten his craft, nor grown cold towards its higher meaning."

A slight murmur of applause ran round the table, yet all looked puzzled. What did the thing mean? Was it supposed to represent Woodgate's state of mind? If so, what more ex-

traordinary, more unlike him, than that he should thus lay it bare before those who, though his comrades in art, were not, with the exception of Hargreaves, his bosom friends? It gave a fillip to the close of a somewhat dull evening, and was discussed variously on the homeward way. Hargreaves and Woodgate walked together along Holborn and through Chancery Lane to Fleet Street, in almost unbroken silence.

"Turn in for a smoke with me?" suggested Hargreaves, at the corner of Norfolk Street.

"I don't mind, it's early yet," assented Woodgate, and the two mounted the familiar stairs together.

On Hargreaves' table lay the card Brian Laidlaw had left earlier in the evening. He took it up, speaking the name and address aloud in audible surprise. "Don't know the chap," he said carelessly, but Woodgate looked as if he had been stung.

"Laidlaw! What the deuce is he doing here? What can he want with you?"

"Couldn't say. Do you know him?"

"Yes, I know him," retorted Woodgate, evidently so put out that Hargreaves regarded him with curiosity.

"If he wants anything particular he will come back, I expect. Light up, Dick, and don't worry. I want to talk."

He threw himself on the sofa with his feet elevated on the hard end thereof, and proceeded meditatively to fill his pipe.

"A cigar once in a while is a luxury, but the pipe's the thing. Now, Dick, I want to know the meaning of the thing you read to-night?"

Woodgate threw himself into the easy chair, twisting Brian Laidlaw's card in his fingers. It seemed to burn them, for he presently tore it to fragments, and let them fall in a shower on the threadbare carpet. It had changed the current of his thought; the mere thought of Brian's presence in London was not in itself alarming, but that he should have sought an interview with Hargreaves seemed significant. Could it be possible that Helen should have placed her interests in his hands? There was torment in the thought. Hargreaves had

to wait so long for an answer to his question, that he repeated it at length, and Woodgate, feeling soothed by the first draw at a particularly good pipe, tried to give him his attention.

"Meaning?" he repeated, just a trifle vaguely. "What meaning did you take out of it?"

"I did not take any. If it was a representation of your own state of mind, then I have to ask your pardon, and to express my joy at the dawn of another life. If it was an analysis of her state of mind, then I'll try to say God forgive you. You're only fit to be your own executioner, and I'll cut you dead from this day, as ought every decent soul in Christendom."

Woodgate oddly smiled, nor did he avoid the penetrating gaze of his friend's eyes.

"Do you think, Harry," he said at length, so calmly that he might have been uttering the merest commonplace; "do you think there is any use in my going to Reutensee?"

Hargreaves took his pipe from his mouth, and sat up.

"If you are in a right frame of mind, go, in God's name, and try what you can to join the broken threads. I can't get her out of my head; she has come between me and everything I have tried to do since it happened."

"You can imagine then, perhaps, though vaguely," said Woodgate "what it has been to me." He laid down his pipe and began to pace the floor. "I'll write first, I think," he said, more to himself than his listener, "and upon the answer I'll shape my future action."

"Don't," said Hargreaves laconically. "Written words are cold, and give out unintentional meanings. Go, and go at once."

Woodgate shook his head.

"I am a coward," he frankly confessed. "You don't know how her contempt is a quality that slays whatever it touches. I can't meet her without some faint assurance that it will not slay me."

It was a speech absolutely characteristic of the man. From his earliest years he had basked in sunshine, leaving the

shadows for others, sparing himself every annoyance, every unpleasantness, at whatever cost. Having thus persistently indulged himself, his weakness became his tyrant, his Nemesis, in the very crisis of his life. Hargreaves looked at him with compassion touched by a healthy scorn. But he understood him quite, and so was less hard upon him in his thought than might have been expected in one who never shrank from a disagreeable task or a disagreeable duty in his life, nay, who had many times ungrudgingly and in silence borne a heavy burden for a less able brother buffeted beyond his strength.

"If you write," he said slowly, and in that manner which betokened his deep interest and concern in what he was saying, "don't forget the manner of woman you have to deal with. Don't mock her with pretence. Her eyes were always clear to detect humbug, now they will be relentless. Say what becomes a man in the circumstances, and should she listen, you have a lifetime for action more eloquent than speech."

There was silence then, and at last Woodgate, whose thoughts had been entirely engrossed, pulled himself together with a start.

"I'll go home now, Harry," he said abruptly. "Thank you, and good-night."

"Good-night," said Hargreaves laconically, but the grasp of his hand was more like the grasp of yore. Hope for the man had revived in his soul, and it was a relief to him of no ordinary kind to find Woodgate not altogether base and void of heart.

As Woodgate passed out of the doorway to the street, on the lookout for a hansom, a tall figure came up from the Embankment, and, though they exchanged careless glances, they failed to recognise each other. It was now half-past eleven, but Brian was anxious to return to Scotland on the morrow, and having seen Hargreaves, would have nothing to detain him in London. He saw the lights in the window, and so made bold to enter and knock at the door. Hargreaves himself opened it, in evening dress of course, and pipe in hand. He betrayed no

surprise on beholding a visitor at such a late hour, and, giving him a courteous good-evening, bade him enter.

"My name is Laidlaw," said Brian apologetically. "I must ask you to excuse this late call. I was here about eight o'clock."

"Yes. I got your card; a preoccupied friend who came in to smoke with me tore it to atoms, and there they are. Pray sit down."

He spoke affably, regarding the intruder with favour, being impressed by the fine manliness of his bearing, as well as the winsomeness of his look. Brian carried a passport to favour in his face. As for him, not less keenly did he regard Hargreaves; he being, by her own confession, the friend of Helen Woodgate.

"I presume my name is not familiar to you," he said, as he sat down. "But there ought to be a bond between us—true friendship for another. I am here by request of Mrs. Woodgate."

Hargreaves started, visibly impressed. "Oh, you are? Then you have heard of or perhaps seen Mrs. Woodgate lately?"

"I only arrived in London this afternoon from Germany. I saw her at Reutensee on Wednesday night."

"Oh, you did?"

Hargreaves was more than surprised, he was astounded, and looked it. He would like to have asked what right this stalwart Scotsman had to meddle in the most private affairs of Helen Woodgate, but Brian relieved him of the necessity.

"I am a very old friend of the family," he said quietly. "We were like brother and sister at the manse of Broadrule. Woodgate also I know well. I simply went to see whether I could be of any use, or help her in this unhappy crisis in her life. So far as that was concerned my visit was useless; the time for advice has not come apparently. She told me I was to see you, and tell you what I chose."

"Is she very bitter against him?" inquired Hargreaves, in a voice which by no means betrayed the absorbing interest he felt

"She is, and justly so. It is well I have not come across him in London, Mr. Hargreaves, or I should not be answerable for the consequences."

"It is fortunate, then, that you did not happen here ten minutes earlier; in fact, I suppose you must have passed each other on the stairs or in the street. Didn't you see anyone?"

"I saw a man leave the door as I approached. Was that Woodgate?"

"It was."

"It is fortunate, as you say, that I did not come up ten minutes sooner. But what good would it do? Revenge is sweet, they say, but this is not a case revenge can mend. I don't know what your connection with the Woodgates has been or is. She certainly said you were her friend; but if you are the gentleman I take you to be, your opinion of that intolerable scoundrel must be the same as mine, and I wonder you can suffer him in the room with you."

"He has gone home—I believe to write to his wife," said Hargreaves meditatively; then, laying down his pipe, he drew up his chair to Brian, and began to talk in earnest. They forgot that they were strangers to each other, forgot everything but the common bond of interest between them.

Two o'clock found them sitting together, talking still.

At the same hour, Woodgate, who was the subject of their talk, closed the letter he had written to Reutensee.

CHAPTER XXX

"I as little understand
Love's decay."

 O to-morrow, Gustav, you go back to school?"

"Yes, madame, and then it is but a few weeks until I go to Bonn or Wiesbaden, where my mother will come."

The two, Helen and the boy, inseparable companions, were sitting together in a curious little balcony, open in front to the lake. They had been reading together a book of English poetry, of which the lad was passionately fond. Everything English was of interest to him because of his love for his English mother.

"We shall miss you here very much, Gustav," said Helen; "what shall I do without the companion of my walks and my reading?"

"But you will go back soon to England, will you not, madame?" inquired the boy, with a slight hesitation, though the thought had long puzzled him why the English lady should have come alone to Reutensee, and why the subject of her return had never once been mentioned in the house.

"No, my boy, I shall not go back. I have nothing in England now," she replied, and even while speaking, the desolation of her condition came home to her with a new sharpness, and the colour died out of her face.

"A letter for madame."



Gustav jumped up, took it from the servant, and offered it to Helen.

When she saw the writing on the envelope, the colour returned in a vivid flood to her face, and she became visibly nervous.

"Shall I go away until you have read your letter?" asked Gustav. "Aunt Clothilde may wish me to do something for her."

"If you please, dear," Helen replied; and suddenly the boy shaded his eyes with his hands, and looked beyond the dark pinewoods to the slope of a distant ascent on the way to Würzburg.

"There is a carriage coming, madame. Do you see it? I wonder who can come to-day. I must go and tell Aunt Clothilde."

The boy darted off, closing the door which shut the room off from the balcony, and Helen was left alone with her husband's letter.

It lay upon her lap, and she looked down upon it with a certain nervousness which betrayed itself in the nervous twitching of her mouth and the perturbed light in her eyes. It came at a time when she had reached another turning-point, when it became necessary for her to decide what must be the next step in her life. She had had time and solitude for thought in Reutensee, and though the tumult was less terrible within, no definite idea for the future had yet arisen. She seemed to be waiting still, for what she did not know. The afternoon was very drowsy and sunshiny, scarcely a ripple fretting the surface of the placid lake; a lovely afternoon, and a lovely spot, whispering of nothing but an infinite peace. She took up the envelope by and by, and looked it carefully over, noting each curve of the delicate, characteristic handwriting, and even studying, as with a new interest, the familiar crest and motto on the seal. How long it seemed since it had been her pride and pleasure to seal her letters so—a very lifetime! No flutter of tenderness stirred her heart as she thus studied the exterior of the missive whose purport she could

not guess. She leaned forward presently, and, resting her arm on the strong rustic parapet, looked down into the lake below, where the trout leaped up merrily to the gnats sporting in the sun; and she felt half tempted for the moment to let the letter drop into those depths and drift away from her sight. That its contents would disturb her, she felt sure; but ashamed at length of her own lack of courage, she broke the seal with a slightly impatient hand, and then sat motionless with the open sheet in her hand a long, long time.

The letter which had cost Woodgate so tremendous an effort, which had been written and re-written in the silent night-watches, was almost curt in its brevity and simplicity, but it was a letter of which Hargreaves, the downright and sincere, would have approved.

"DEAR HELEN,"—it began,—“It is imperative that I now write to you, whatever may be the issue. I have waited until waiting has become no longer tolerable or possible; therefore I ask, what is to be your final decision? I know you well enough to feel sure that my offence is one you will find hard to forgive. It is one which I must to the end of my life deplore. I have no excuse to offer: I only ask you to believe that after the climax has come a most bitter reaction, and that my own folly, to call it by no harsher name, now stands out before me in all its nakedness, a hideous reproach, and I know now the priceless value of what I have renounced. I will not, I dare not, mock you with promises which in the light of the past may well fill you with scorn. I only ask another chance. I beg of you to return at least to the nominal shelter of my roof—for your sake as much as for mine; then might the future hold some possibility of hope for us both. Do not, I entreat, decline this in the impulse of the moment. Until I hear from you I am a miserable man.—Yours,
R. WOODGATE.”

Helen read it over carefully twice, and at the second reading the expression of her face grew less hard and set. It was at least a sincere letter, but it failed absolutely to touch her heart,

to awaken in her a single tender or relenting thought. The bitterness had passed, it is true, but in its place had come an indifference more deadly and more hopeless than the wildest storm of her indignation. She sat there, her eyes fixed on the lines which Woodgate had written out of the agony of his heart, as unmoved as if it had been a missive from a stranger's pen. When she came again to the words, "return at least to the nominal shelter of my roof," she smiled a faint and slightly bitter smile and shook her head.

"It is impossible," she said under her breath. "It can never be."

She sat some minutes longer, but the boy did not return, and the servant came to her presently, saying the Gräfin waited her at coffee in the little salon. Helen put the letter in its envelope and carried it with her. Of late the old Gräfin had failed much in health, and looked frail and worn, though her keen eye had lost none of its clearness, and she had relinquished none of her accustomed duties. She belonged to a race who could endure to the bitter end, and to whom self-indulgence was an unknown term. She had suffered for years from an internal disorder, which was now rapidly approaching its crisis, and could only have a fatal issue. She had wasted to a skeleton, her garments hung loosely upon her, and her long slender hands were pitiful to see. But she was brave always, and her smile never failed, though it was touched with the sublimity of pathos, and moved Helen sometimes to tears.

"Gustav tells me you have had a letter," she said, looking up inquiringly. "Good tidings, I hope."

"From my husband," answered Helen simply. "I wish you to read it—yes, now."

Even then the Gräfin hesitated a moment. They had talked but little of the matter since the day the stricken wife had come seeking sympathy and shelter, and the old woman felt the extreme delicacy of the theme. She had borne her own sorrows in solitude, asking or expecting sympathy from none; and she shrank from entering the inner courts of another life, though her heart overflowed with compassion towards the woman, who

thus early had faced the extreme bitterness of life. Helen smoothed out the open sheet and laid it before her, repeating simply, "I wish you to read it." The Gräfin then did so slowly, Helen sitting at the table with her elbows on it, and her chin resting in her hands, watching her expression as she read. The Gräfin took off her spectacles, bent her searching eyes on Helen's face, and spoke only three words—

"Well, my daughter?"

"Tell me what you think, Gräfin," said Helen, with a most unusual touch of impatience.

"I think," said the Gräfin slowly, "that it is the letter of an honest man whose sin has come home to him. You will return to him, as he desires?"

Helen rose and walked across the floor with clasped hands in silence.

"Aunt Clothilde," she said, using the name she was privileged to share with Gustav, "I cannot: it is impossible."

"Why, my daughter?" inquired the old woman gently. "It is not so Heaven deals with the sinner, else what of us? He has bitterly wounded your heart, it is true; but it is the lot of women to suffer one way or other, but to suffer, here below; we cannot escape our destiny. It may be for the salvation of your husband's soul."

"And what of mine?" asked Helen hotly, and her face flushed. "I am not so good a woman as I was when I married him—oh, not nearly! I had simple faiths; he has destroyed them all. I believed most people to be good, or at least that they tried to be so; his creed is that selfishness is the only human creed, and I think he has proved it. I am not happy now, but I am happier than I would be with him. How can I, having no respect for him, return to him and retain my own self-respect?"

The Gräfin shook her head, took a draught of coffee from the cup, and read the letter again.

"It is the letter of a man putting a restraint upon himself," she said slowly. "Unless I am mistaken, you are not alone in your suffering. Do not be too hard on him, child; remember that men have a harder struggle after goodness than we have;

and you have your own life to think of. It is all before you yet—what are you going to do with it?”

“There is work for women whose life is over,” said Helen quickly. “In hospitals, among children and sick people, I can still be useful, though I cannot be happy. After all, happiness is not the end of all.”

“I am an old woman, standing, as you know, on the brink of the grave, a woman who has seen and suffered much,” said the Gräfin impressively. “I know my kind, and I think I know you; not for nothing have I watched you these many days. The life you speak of is not for you. You would sink under it. You are one of the women to whom home and its interests are essential, you must not throw them away. This is a crisis—a bitter one, I admit, but not without its promise of better things.”

Helen shook her head, and gave a little deprecating wave of her hand as if to put the possibility far from her.

“He—he said he had married me out of gratitude. Can I ever forget that?—the sting of it will live with me till I die,” she cried passionately.

“The man was not himself at the moment, my daughter,” said the Gräfin calmly; “and even if it had its element of truth, love has arisen from a feebler root. It is possible that out of this terrible convulsion in your relations may arise the love which will bless your later life. Do not throw it away.”

But Helen remained fixed in her own conviction.

“I have not the smallest desire to go back, nor one tender thought towards him. He has completely killed my love. To go back feeling as I do would be to make confusion worse confounded, and would end in the shipwreck of two souls. No, no, it can never be.”

The Gräfin regarded the lithe, graceful figure, the flushed, beautiful face of the younger woman with a curious yearning, wistful look.

“I wish, I wish you had had a child!”

Deeper grew the flush on Helen’s cheek and her eyes filled with bitter tears.

"Oh, Gräfin, how can you say what is so cruel?" she cried in a choking voice. "I—I have never ceased to thank God that that is spared me; it would have made the thing intolerable."

At that moment there was a great rumbling in the courtyard, and presently Hans came running breathless to his mistress.

"The Graf!" he cried in a half-scared voice. "Graf Ludwig has arrived, and he seems ill unto death."

CHAPTER XXXI

"The world has dealt with me
As when the hard sea bites and chews a stone,
And changes its first form."

THE Gräfin immediately left the room. Helen walked to the gable window which commanded a peep of the courtyard, and saw the carriage standing surrounded by a little group of servants, the boy Gustav among them. Presently she saw alight from the carriage the tall, gaunt figure of a man with a military cloak over his uniform, leaning heavily with one arm on his servant and the other on his sword. He looked like a man stricken with mortal sickness. Helen looked at him with the keenest possible interest, the husband of Hilda von Reutensee. He was of the true Teuton type, powerfully and squarely built, and carrying himself, even in his evident extreme weakness, with a military grace. His face was extremely fair, ruddy in health, but now pale and worn; his hair bright flaxen, as was the moustache which drooped over the mouth, effectually hiding whatever may have been its strength or weakness. When he saw his aunt hurrying across the courtyard, he saluted her courteously, and the faint shadow of a smile flitted across his face. Then the boy, Gustav, who till now had stood aloof, came forward impulsively and touched his father's arm, while his eyes wistfully looked up into his face. Helen was struck by that look; it conveyed so much—all the longing of the child's heart for the father's love which

had hitherto been denied him. The Graf regarded the boy steadfastly for a moment, and then laid his hand kindly on his bare head. The boy, touched to the quick, burst into tears; and Helen drew back, her own eyes wet, and feeling that she was a witness to a very sacred scene.

She was still standing by the table when the sound of voices and approaching footsteps indicated their approach. They, however, passed by the door of the little salon, and Helen knew by the direction of the retreating sound that they had gone to the rooms which were always kept in readiness for the Graf.

The whole household was now astir. Once a year, when the Graf came from the shooting, it awakened from its drowsy slumber, and was on the alert night and day, the master of Reutensee being one who exacted his meed of service, pressed down and running over; and though his coming was totally unexpected, and he appeared fit only for a sick-bed, the effect of his presence was precisely the same. Helen was left a long time alone, and had gone to her own room when the Gräfin came to her, looking white and anxious.

"It is a new trouble," she said nervously, "and I fear the Graf is mortally stricken. He has been fighting in a duel, and the wound is difficult to heal. He has neglected it, and the result is sad to see. I fear he has come home to die."

Helen murmured a word of sympathy, and the Gräfin sat down wiping the moisture from her brow.

"He is completely worn out, and there is a gentleness I have never seen in him before. He had not an oath or a harsh word for a servant since he entered the house two hours ago. Formerly his presence was like a great storm which scarcely knew a calm moment but in sleep. I fear, I fear, Graf Ludwig's days are numbered."

"They may not be," said Helen gently. "The quiet of Reutensee and careful nursing may make him well. Has he seen a physician or surgeon?"

"Yes, many of them, and I gather that they have given him but scant hope; but I have sent to Reutensee for our good Pastor Loeder, who has rare medical skill as well as spiritual

grace. It is sad to see a man stricken in his prime, and to think how little he has to show that is worthy or noble for his forty years of life."

"It may be the crisis in his life," said Helen hopefully. "And now, will you tell me truly, madame, would you not prefer me to leave Reutensee? In these sad family circumstances the presence of a stranger may be irksome."

"A stranger?" repeated the Gräfin in a mild tone of reproach. "Have I so regarded and treated you, Helen, that you still call yourself a stranger in Reutensee? To me, you seem like a daughter of the house."

"Forgive me, then I will stay. I have had much experience of nursing. I may be of use; I may be able to spare you, my beloved friend, some anxious hours. But"—Helen hesitated a moment—"will it not be necessary to send for his wife?"

"Not yet. I suggested it, and it was then he exhibited the only sign of impatience I have observed this time; but I fear they are alienated for ever. I am glad that Gustav remains. How his heart yearns over his father! It would melt a heart of stone."

"He clings more to his mother," said Helen, "and yet he is a boy of whom any father might be proud."

"Ah, yes; but he has starved the child of love, and nothing can atone to the young heart for that. There are many things about my nephew's wife I do not understand, but she has been a good and loving mother to the boy, and had Ludwig consulted his own best interests, he would have permitted her to keep him."

"Is Graf Ludwig then so hopelessly bad?" inquired Helen, with interest. "I caught a glimpse of him from the window, and I thought there was an air of nobility about him."

"He is a selfish man—selfish and hard, and his wife never loved him; that was where the mischief lay. I do not blame her; she was very young, and he tried her very hard. Then they were of a different nationality, which is always a risk, a great risk, indeed. But now I must go send my message to Pastor Loeder."

The arrival of Graf Ludwig made a great stir and change in the Schloss, and, though he lay upon his bed unable to move, seemed to exercise an influence over the household. Helen once or twice took her turn to watch by him while he slept, but he had not seemed to observe her presence in the room.

One evening at sundown, however, she was sitting at his chamber window with her book when she became conscious that his eyes were fixed upon her. Immediately she laid down her book and glided across to his bed. Now, Helen Woodgate was at home at a sick-bed anywhere. She was a woman born to minister. Her movements were gentle and soothing, her voice sweetly modulated, her whole presence restful.

"What can I do for you?" she asked softly. "The Gräfin has gone to lie down. Would you like me to call her?"

"No; sit down and talk to me," said the sick man in excellent English. "I know all about you, but I want to hear you talk. Sit down."

In some surprise Helen took the chair by the bed.

"I did not think you were aware of my presence in the house," she said, thinking that this terrible Graf, of whom the whole household stood in terror and awe, could both look and speak pleasantly when he chose. There is something in the prostration of a strong man on a sick-bed which appeals very specially to a woman's compassion and sympathy.

"You think me very ill, madame, I can see," he said, with a faint, grim smile. "Are they waiting and hoping for my death-bell?"

"Have you given them cause to regard that as a boon instead of a misfortune, Graf Ludwig?" asked Helen, with unexpected sharpness, which made him give an inward chuckle, even while he felt surprised. No woman had spoken so candidly and straightly to him since that stormy day he had parted from his wife in the Hôtel de l'Univers at Monte Carlo.

"I came here expecting to die. I confess I have seen many physicians, but, bah! what can they do for one in an extremity? I believe myself that old fossil Loeder in the

village knows more than any of them. His cures are those of an old housewife, but they do no harm if no good."

"Pastor Loeder has not given up hope, Graf Ludwig," said Helen, as she measured out his medicine from the phial, the sick man watching her intently the while, his blue eyes still retaining an unusually gentle look.

"You are English. I have an English wife who has served me but shabbily. I daresay they have regaled you with the history of our domestic felicity. Is it the fashion of your countrywomen to leave their husbands for the merest punctilio?"

Helen winced, and the hand grasping the medicine glass trembled.

"I think not. We are more true to our vows than the women of other nationalities, Graf Ludwig, but we do not like to be deceived."

"My wife had an impossible standard of excellence, but the greatest offence was that she hated me from the first. Tell me, do you not think it was wiser to part?"

"You are talking too much," said Helen quietly. "Drink this, and keep still. Pastor Loeder has told us that quietness is essential to your recovery."

"Ach Himmel! I have lain still for eight days, and I had made up my mind to talk to you. You say that because you do not want to answer my question. If you will answer it, I will be still, I promise you."

Helen smiled, administered the medicine, shook up his pillows, and made smooth the coverlet about his neck, gently and tenderly, as she might have ministered to a sick child. She felt no repulsion towards him, but rather an attraction. There was a fearlessness in his blue eye, and a lurking sweetness about the mouth, which seemed to tell her that the stern Graf had another and a gentler side. The pity of it was that those whom it might have blessed had, through some strange perverseness, failed to call it into life.

"What was it you asked me?" she said. "Whether it was wiser to part? How can I, a stranger, answer that? But I

know that in some of her sad moments your wife has regretted the circumstances which necessitated it."

"How do you know that?" he asked, with apparent quietness; but Helen saw his eyes flash with a half-restrained eagerness.

"Because she has told me so."

"Do you then know my wife?" he asked eagerly, and making an attempt to raise himself on his elbow.

"I thought you said you knew all about me," said Helen whimsically.

"Ah, well, Aunt Clothilde told me you were English, and had come here for a little quiet after trouble, but she did not say you knew my wife. Tell me, when did you see her?"

"In England, six weeks ago," replied Helen, with evident restraint, which, however, the Graf in his eagerness did not observe.

"Were you her friend? Do you know intimately her way of life? I have often wondered about it, but I know no one in England who can tell me anything of her. How does she live?"

"If you will be quiet, Graf Ludwig, and ask no more questions, I shall tell you all I know of her," replied Helen; "but if you excite yourself, I shall go away and not come back."

"You will not be so cruel, madame. I should excite myself more and more then. And yet why should I care? She hates me, and never hid her scorn of me. Only once, I remember, when I was ill, did she betray any womanly or wifely quality."

"Which, nevertheless, she possesses in a greater degree than most," said Helen; "only you did not encourage their exercise."

"She has spoken to you of me then, I see, and the account has been bad. Tell me what she said."

"She did not forget your good qualities, Graf, even while deploring the bad," said Helen. "Do you know that there is no woman in London more beloved and honoured by those whose good opinion is worth having; that she spends her life in doing good, and that even to have called her wife is a privilege many envy you?"

"Then she has not consoled herself with another?" said the Graf, and Helen looked at him with indignation.

"That you should say so proves how little you knew her," she said curtly.

"It is worth hearing how you stand up for her. Tell me more. Does she feel bitter against me?"

"Only for one thing, Graf Ludwig."

"And that?"

"Because you keep the boy from her."

"Does that make her unhappy?"

"It does; and it seems so needless, as well as so cruel, since he is not with you," said Helen, pleading for her friend with a passion she would not have betrayed in any cause of her own; "and she is very fit to rear him. Besides, his heart clings to her—you must know that."

"I had to punish her somehow. I did not wish her to leave me, and I thought she would not hold out so many years."

"You do not know her," repeated Helen. "If she believed it her duty to leave you, for certain causes, she would never return until these causes were repented of and removed."

"Did she also make you acquainted with the cause?"

"Never; nor did I wish to know. But of this I am very sure, Graf Ludwig, the fault was yours."

The Graf never took his eyes from her face; her frank outspokenness fascinated him.

"If I die, no one can keep the boy from her," he said.

"No; but why wait for death? Let him go to his mother instead of to Erlangen, so you may have the joy of doing a kind and a generous deed."

"But then I shall have lost my son as well as my wife" said the sick man, with a feeble touch of impatience.

Helen saw that he was weary, though his interest had not abated.

"Is Gustav then so much to you?" she asked, as she moved to the window and arranged the blind to avert the sun's rays from the bed.

"He is too like his mother, and his eyes reproach me," said the Graf, and turned upon his pillow.

He lay still so long that Helen at last made a movement towards the door, thinking he slept.

"Are you going, madame? I do not sleep, only think. And she is unhappy, my brilliant Hilda, is she? I thought far otherwise."

Helen made no reply, but placed her hand on the door.

"You will come again and talk to me, madame, will you not?"

"Yes, if you wish it."

"Have you really gone? Well, since you wish it, and you say she is unhappy, she shall have the boy."

CHAPTER XXXII

"Bid not a hungry child be satisfied
With heritage of many cornfields."



ELEN went out, and at the end of the long corridor met Gustav, who was seldom far from the sick-room, though he had not yet been admitted.

"Have you come from papa now, madame? How is he?" he inquired eagerly.

Helen's eyes filled, and, bending forward, she kissed him on the brow.

"Go to him now, dear," she whispered, with a sudden intuition, which she felt was right.

A great eagerness leaped into the boy's expressive eyes, but he hesitated.

"Does he wish to see me, madame? I would not intrude," he said humbly. "Has he asked for me?"

"We have been talking of you, dearest. Go now, very gently, and if he is asleep, steal away again. Where is Aunt Clothilde?"

"Not yet downstairs," answered the lad, and crept towards the door of the sick-chamber, Helen watching him, her own desolation for the moment dwarfed by that great mystery, the sorrowful yearning of a child. He opened the door softly, and closed it again. Helen leaned her head a moment against the oak-panelled wall, and uplifted her heart in prayer. Could it be that the rent threads might be joined again, if only in death?

The Graf moved eagerly at the opening of the door, hoping Helen had come back. When he saw the timid, expectant face of the boy, he looked for the moment disappointed, and then beckoned him towards the bed.

"Well, Gustav, have you come to inquire after me? Shut the door and come in."

The lad was not slow to obey. He threw himself on his knees by the bed, all his loving heart in his eyes as he fixed them on the changed face of the father whom he had never understood.

"You are better, papa, are you not?" he inquired wistfully.

"Better? I don't know, my boy; it matters nothing. Tell me, would Reutensee not be happier for my death?"

"Oh, no, no!" cried the lad. "You must not say that."

"There are two who would be happier, I know—you and your mother."

The boy's face flushed, and for the moment he was torn betwixt two feelings, his passionate and loyal love to his absent mother, and his newly-awakened tenderness towards his father, who had shown him, after all, such poor fatherliness all these years. Encouraged by the unwonted softness of his father's look, the lad tried to give expression to the mingled emotions which raged in his young heart.

"Oh, papa," he cried impulsively, "why are we different from others? Why are you here and mamma in England? Why cannot we all be together, as others are?"

"Ask her, Gustav. You will see her soon."

"Not till midsummer," replied Gustav sadly. "Let me write to her. She will come at once, I am sure, when she hears you are ill. Let me write, dear papa!"

"Not yet. There are things you cannot understand, Gustav, because you are too young. Your mother would not come here even for your asking, even if I desired it, which I do not yet. If Pastor Loeder says I am to die, it will be different; then she must come, because there are things that must be arranged for you, the future Graf von Reutensee."

"And if you recover, then, papa, will it be as before?" inquired the boy, with that great wistfulness which secretly touched the man's heart.

"Not quite; one thing will be different," said the Graf, and, moving his hand, he laid it on the boy's bright head, where it lay on the pillow very near his own. "I am sorry I have been so rough with you, lad. Perhaps I was jealous of your love for your mother. Didn't she tell you many times what a bad man your father was?"

"Never, never! She always bade me look up to you, and pay you a son's duty. I have always loved you, papa, only you would not let me show it."

The Graf lay still a moment with his eyes closed, pondering the boy's words in his mind. She had been more loyal than he; she had never sought to poison the young mind of the child against him, and had borne uncomplainingly the harsh verdict which restricted her intercourse with her own child, and had made it but a fearful pleasure. How he must have misjudged her! His thoughts grew very tender towards the woman against whom he had so long cherished a supreme bitterness. The heart of a man still slumbered in the breast of Ludwig, Graf von Reutensee; the husks of the world had not robbed him of every manly quality. Lying there with closed eyes, his son's warm breath on his cheek, a vision of what might have been swept over him in a wave of intolerable pain, which caused him to give a quick shudder.

"Dear papa, you are feeling worse. Let me call Aunt Clothilde!" cried the lad in alarm; but his father silenced him quickly.

"No; it is nothing. You should be back at school, Gustav; should you not? What would you say to going to London to your mother, instead of back to Erlangen?"

"To be with her always, do you mean?" inquired the boy in a breathless whisper, and the red rose in his cheek.

"Yes. There are good schools in England as in Germany. You shall go to your mother instead of to Erlangen."

"But not just yet, dear papa."

"Why not? I thought you would fly on the wings of the wind," said the Graf in slight banter, and secretly admiring the fine, lithe figure of the boy as he stood up, holding himself as straightly as any soldier in the ranks. It was impossible not to feel a thrill of fatherly pride in that gallant boy; and Gustav, with the quick intuition of a child, felt his father's eye rest upon him for the first time with approval he did not seek to hide, and his young heart swelled within him for very joy, and his blue eyes, heritage from his English mother, became suffused with a mist of tears.

"If you will let me stay by you, papa, to wait upon you," he said hurriedly. "Mamma is well; she does not need me so much. Let me stay here and be with you. I will be so very quiet, and not trouble you—only let me stay!"

"Come here, Gustav, and kneel beside me once more."

The boy did so, and Graf Ludwig looked straight in the guileless eyes.

"Say after me: 'I forgive you, father.'"

"But why must I say that, papa? There is nothing to forgive."

"Yes; there are years of neglect, and other things you could not understand. Say the words after me."

The boy did so tremblingly, feeling as if it were a sacrilege to repeat them.

"Now kiss me. I shall sleep now, and you may sit by my window till you are tired."

A great sob broke from the boy's bursting, happy heart, and he threw himself on his father's breast.

"And you will tell your mother when you go to her, or when she comes here after I am dead," said the Graf, "what I have made you say—she will understand."

In her own room, wondering whether the interview should have such happy ending, Helen Woodgate pondered the situation in her mind, and finally, opening her portfolio, wrote a letter. Having finished and sealed it, she put on her bonnet and walked down to the village to post it with her own hand. She had taken upon her a great responsibility, yet her inward

consciousness told her she was right. When she returned to the Schloss, she at once sought the Gräfin, who was making her toilet in her own room.

"I have done a very daring thing, Aunt Clothilde," she said calmly, "and I am going away from Reutensee."

The old lady paused with her cap-strings in her hand, and looked round at her in wonderment.

"I have sent for the Countess Hilda."

"You have! But why?"

"Because I have had a talk with Graf Ludwig this afternoon, and I feel sure the time has come."

"He is certainly very ill, and her place is by his side," said the Gräfin musingly. "But does it please him that she should come?"

"I have not asked him, and you must not tell him, Aunt Clothilde. In such a crisis everything should be left to the influence of the moment."

"For your age, you are a wise woman," said the old lady. "I pray God to bless your experiment."

"He did not speak harshly of her, Gräfin; and his heart is softened towards Gustav, who is with him now. There is good in Graf Ludwig, and the time has come for it to come to the surface."

"We are bidden believe that there is good in all things evil," said the Gräfin, with a sigh. "But Ludwig has long shown his worst side at Reutensee. Yet do I remember him such an one as Gustav, though, perhaps, less sweet. Ah me! how this bitter life can warp the better nature of a man, and bring him to a level with the dust. If you are to be the peace-maker in Reutensee, my daughter, many hearts will bless your name; but—why must you go? why not stay and see your ministry crowned?"

"That," said Helen, with averted head, "I may not tell you. But it is better for me to go."

In connection with her own trouble, Helen had never mentioned Hilda von Reutensee's name, though many times tempted to it. How thankful was she now for her own

restraint, which would enable Graf Ludwig's wife to receive her kinswoman without prejudice.

"Tell me, Helen—in the press of new anxieties I have not had time to ask—but tell me now what answer have you returned to your husband?" inquired the Gräfin anxiously. "If it is to him you return, then gladly shall I speed your going."

"It is not. I have written to him telling him my state of mind was such that I could not yet go back. What the future may hold I know not, but to go back with this indifference in my heart would be to make the breach complete. We must wait until my heart speaks in a different tone."

"Then why leave us? Where can you go?"

"I have my own people in my own land, Gräfin: their hearts are heavy because of me. I shall go to them."

"Wherever you may go, my daughter, the blessing of the Most High will follow you," said the old lady, with solemnity, "and I doubt not will show you the way wherein you are to go. The heart knoweth its own bitterness and its own need. If you feel that the time has come for you to go forth from Reutensee, our love and prayers can but follow you."

"When I am gone you will write to me, Aunt Clothilde, if the news be good. If I hear nothing, I shall know the experiment has failed," said Helen; "and I go feeling that there will be a welcome for me here should I wish to come again."

She began her preparations that very night, and having once taken her decision, seemed eager to be gone.

Next day Graf Ludwig was visibly weaker, and partially unconscious, not recognising one from the other. Pastor Loeder in grave anxiety advised the Gräfin to send to Würzburg for a surgeon skilled in such cases. He admitted that he had come to the end of his resources, and that there was some graver seat of disease than he had yet discovered. In these circumstances Helen did not hasten her departure, though she had resolved to leave before the arrival of the Countess Hilda. On the morning of the third day, just after the Würzburg surgeon had performed a serious operation on his patient,

whose condition he pronounced most critical, a telegram came from England saying she was leaving London that morning. That afternoon Helen left Reutensee, abode in Paris two days and went to London by a night train. She was conscious of a strange, unreal feeling as she landed once more in England, from which she seemed to have been absent many years. No one knew of her coming; she felt like a waif in London streets, a waif for whom there was no shelter or home. She who had been so loved and sheltered in the Dale, whose visit to any house, small or great, had been made an occasion of jubilee, was now cast homeless in the great dark tide of London life. The grim humour of it made her smile, but the smile was wintry, and died swiftly on her lips.

She alighted from the train, and after a moment's hesitation entered the Charing Cross Hotel. She had time to breakfast and catch the Scotch train if she so willed, but she felt in no haste. After all, her welcome there was not assured. The only communications she had received from her sister at Reutensee had been affectionate, but distinctly reproachful. She had brought a blot on the family name. Her position was indeed serious, and such as a woman of her character could not long sustain. She was upheld just then by the strain of an unnatural excitement, which, however, was gradually approaching its limit. Outwardly she was calm, dignified, self-possessed; but within there dwelt a trembling soul. It is a terrible thing for a woman delicately nurtured and tenderly cherished to find herself thus thrown upon her own resources, without aim or object in existence. It was a state of affairs, as I said, which Helen Woodgate could not possibly endure for any length of time. With her return to English soil, to the scene of her married life, her imagined peace of mind, her indifference fled, and she became once more passionate, indignant, torn by a thousand conflicting feelings, which, finding no vent, consumed her very heart. She was conscious of extreme weariness of body and mind, of weakness even for which she could not account. She had been so strong always. She felt impatient of the physical change in herself. But human endurance has

its limits. She had lived the past six weeks in an unnatural world, putting an unnatural restraint upon herself, and now another crisis was at hand.

She went into the hotel, ordered a room and breakfast, and, having refreshed herself, leisurely went forth once more into the bright sunshine of a brilliant May day. The streets had a fascination for her, the whole city looking its loveliest, a peculiar charm. Moved by some uncontrollable impulse, she got into a hansom in Trafalgar Square and gave the order to drive to the Manor House at Hampstead. The driver, as usual, had difficulty in finding it among the tortuous windings of Upper Hampstead; but at length she reached the gates, only to find them closed, the lodge shut up, the whole place bearing that desolate and chilly look peculiar to the uninhabited house.

CHAPTER XXXIII

“Why go without me, O you loved and loving?
What has earth left of happiness or peace?”

SOPHIA RYDER occupied a small house in Craddock Street, Bloomsbury, a house which was a home for herself and her boys. They were very poor in this world's goods, and many an anxious hour was spent by the little house-mistress wrinkling her brows over accounts it seemed impossible to square; nevertheless, they were happy, and simple pleasures hardly won were treasured and enjoyed. If they could not go to the mountains or the seaside when everybody else was out of town, had they not a choice of all the London parks? and could they not go to Hampstead Heath for the modest sum of fourpence a head?

As was inevitable, the little story-writer had her own cares and worries with the lads. They were not always amenable to her authority; on the contrary, they were at times so unruly that she was in despair. But they had warm, impulsive Irish hearts, and when an appeal to their principles was of no avail, one made to their affection was pretty sure to succeed.

About five o'clock in the afternoon on which Helen Woodgate found herself in London, Aunt Sophy's three boys were having their tea in the little sitting-room in Craddock Street. They were alone, their aunt being at the weekly meeting of her club. It was a very poor little room, shabby to the last degree, and

the table presented a heterogeneous collection of battered cups, which showed visible signs of rough usage. In the absence of his aunt, Tim, the second boy, presided over the tea-tray, dealing out sundry cups of very weak tea to Jack and little Tony. Larry, whose rare abilities and winning ways had determined Hilda von Reutensee to give him the best possible chance, was at Harrow, where he made it hot for himself and everybody with whom he came in contact. But there was nobody in his form adored as was Larry Ryder, and though the masters had to punish him often and sometimes seriously for pure mischief, they always performed it with a grudge. For there were the true Irish pathos and humour in his eyes which disarmed every prejudice and won every heart. Although Larry was the ringleader in larks, Tim did not come far behind, and little Tony was described by his aunt as a perfect imp. Jack, the third, was more studious and more dreamy—a lad with a fair Raphael face and a pair of dreamy artist's eyes. Tim was a typical Irishman; there was something intensely comical in his square, squat figure and chubby, freckled face, with a wide red-lipped mouth made for laughter, and a pair of round eyes as innocent as a baby's. They were making a great deal of noise, and squabbling a little over the contents of a jam-pot which Aunt Sophy had set out by way of treat in her absence, when a hansom drove up to the door. Instantly three noses were glued on to the lower window panes and three pairs of eyes fixed intently on the cab. It took little Tony all his time to reach the window-pane, which was a trifle high, and there he stood, a comical figure in a pair of very ill-fitting pants (a triumph of Aunt Sophy's economical art) and a long blue pinafore reaching to his heels—a strange costume altogether, but one which did not disturb the equanimity of Tony in the least. He had not yet commenced the study of the philosophy of clothes.

"It's Mrs. Woodgate!" cried Tim joyously; and the others set up a whoop of delight and trooped out to the door. Children do not readily forget, and the young Ryders had not so many pleasures that they had so soon forgotten sundry

pleasant days spent at the Manor House at Hampstead. So when Helen alighted from her cab, looking very worn and white and dispirited, she was greeted by a vision of three radiant faces (one adorned by several smears of jam) arrayed in the doorway—a sight which warmed her desolate heart. For, after all, these were home faces, and a home welcome beamed upon her from out those open saucy eyes which had not as yet learned to veil their feelings.

“Aunt Soph’s out,” said Tim. “But you won’t go away; she’ll be back in a jiffy, I’m sure.”

“No, no, I won’t go away; I’ve come to see you. And how are you all?”

She kissed each happy face, and even bestowed two on the jam-smeared Tony, whose innocent, angelic look went to her very heart. She dearly loved children, and somehow, in the midst of her desolation, the boisterous welcome of the little Ryders gave her a thrill of joy, which came very near to tears. Tony slipped his grimy paw confidently into her dainty glove, Tim closed the door, and the small procession moved on to the sitting-room. Then Judith, the Irish help, appeared from the rear regions, looking rather askance at the unusual sight of a fine lady, with whom, however, the boys seemed to stand in no manner of awe.

“Missus isn’t in, ma’am,” she said apologetically. “An’ the bhoys is hevin’ their teas, an’ a dhirty mess they do make for shure. ’Tain’t fit for the loikes o’ you to go in.”

“Oh, never mind; bring me a cup, Judy, and I’ll join them,” said Helen with a pleasant smile; and immediately Tim essayed to improve the appearance of the table by putting the things in their proper places, and rating Tony for having in his haste laid his bread jam-side down on the table—a reproof which had but small effect on the youthful offender, who continued his meal in seraphic silence.

“Aunt Soph’s at the club. It’s Friday, you know,” said Tim, with an important explanatory air. “She’ll be home at six, and it’s half-past five now. Not long to wait.”

“Oh no.” Helen laid down her gloves, and, leaning back

in Aunt Sophy's battered old rocking-chair, looked round her with ineffable content. The place was poor and mean, untidy and sordid, but, brightened by these dear young faces, seemed so like a bit of home that it nearly broke her heart. She was very weary, very homesick, very sad, and it all came home to her so powerfully that she could scarcely retain her composure.

"And how is your auntie?" she forced herself to ask, talk being her only safeguard.

"Oh, auntie's all right; but she's gone to the club in a proper wax to-day, I can tell you. She hadn't time hardly to go, she had so much to do; but she wanted to go, for somebody, though I don't exactly know who—I say, Tony, you might at least wait till the lady can sit down with us. It's awful to go cramming yourself like that. Never mind him, Mrs. Woodgate; he's only a little chap, and when Aunt Sophy isn't here he thinks he can do anything."

"I needn't ask how you all are," said Helen, with an indulgent smile at the offending Tony. "When did you see Larry, and how is he?"

"Oh he's all right; he was here at Easter. My! what stunning times they have at Harrow!—no end of fun. I only wish I'd his chance."

"And your Easter holidays are over, aren't they?"

"Oh, yes; ages ago. It'll soon be midsummer," said Tim; and just then Judy entered with a clean cup and saucer, and a fresh pot of tea on a waiter, apologising profusely and loudly at the same time for the condition of things.

"Oh, dry up, Judy," said Tim loftily. "*I've* apologised to Mrs. Woodgate, and she doesn't mind. My! I wish Aunt Sophy would come in just now, wouldn't she stare!"

Aunt Sophy did stare with a vengeance twenty minutes later, when she came dancing into the little sitting-room, and beheld Mrs. Woodgate sitting behind the tea-tray, with her cloak off and her bonnet-strings flung back on her shoulders, Tim on her right hand, Jack on her left, and Tony hanging on to the back of her chair.

"Well, I never! no, I never, never did!" she cried

hysterically. "Mercy me! where have you come from, and are you flesh and blood?"

"Yes, genuine, as the boys can testify, and I've emptied Judy's teapot. The first English tea I've drunk for weeks, and it was too delicious to leave a drop. And how are you?" said Helen, as she kissed the little story-writer on both cheeks.

She was a very odd little figure, for times had of late been harder than usual, and sundry old garments had been remade, and had suffered in the process. A very odd little figure indeed, but a true heart beamed from those bright black eyes, and sincerity was writ large on every feature of her face.

"Have you had your teas, boys? Well, clear out, and come in at eight sharp to your lessons. Oh, but it's Friday? Well, Tim, bring Tony in at eight. Off you go, all of you at once."

They were reluctant, after the manner of boys, when dismissed peremptorily from company they like, but they obeyed. Then Sophia shut the door and sank helplessly into a seat.

"What does it mean?" she said in the same hysterical voice, for she had been thinking of Helen all the way from Fleet Street, and to see the embodiment of her thoughts was something of a shock. "I thought you were in Germany at Reutensee. The Countess thinks so. She left on Monday morning."

"Yes, I know she did, and I left for England on the same afternoon."

The little story-writer sat still, nervously clasping and unclasping her hands. She had no right to ask questions, and yet it was hard to refrain.

"The Count is very ill, I suppose?" she said interrogatively.

"Very ill indeed, but I trust not hopelessly," answered Helen.

"Not hopelessly?" repeated Miss Ryder, with a slight uplifting of her brows. "I understood he was dying. I think the Countess thought so too."

"You saw her quite recently, then?"

"Yes; I spent Sunday evening with her, and saw her off at Charing Cross on Monday morning."

"Is she well?"

"Not very," replied Miss Ryder, and both felt the conversation to be a trifle embarrassing.

"When did you see Mr. Hargreaves?" asked Helen, seeking to change it.

"Last week. He went to Margate on Sunday morning with Mr. Woodgate," said the little story-writer quickly, and not looking at Helen as she spoke.

"To make a stay?" inquired Helen calmly.

"I believe so. I have been at the club this afternoon, Mrs. Woodgate, and I heard a rumour—you know what a nest of rumours it is—that Mr. Woodgate had lost all his money. I hope it isn't true."

"I couldn't say, I am sure," replied Helen, with the utmost indifference. "I have heard nothing about it."

Sophy Ryder got up. She was an emotional, excitable person, and she had laid this romantic tragedy so seriously to heart that she could scarcely control herself. Between the Countess and Mrs. Woodgate she was awkwardly placed: both trusted her and looked upon her as a friend, yet neither had ever openly spoken of the breach which was uppermost in the minds of all three.

"You don't look very well yourself," she said, looking at Helen straightly. "In fact, you look worn out. Where are you staying?"

"I am not staying anywhere. I only arrived from the Continent this morning."

"And are you going anywhere else? Excuse my questions, Mrs. Woodgate, but one must ask questions, especially when there are a million things one wants to know."

"I think of going to Scotland to-night; but if you will invite me, I shall be very glad to remain one night with you. I am tired. Now I come to think of it, I travelled all last night."

Sophia flushed with pleasure.

"Invite you? I didn't dare. But if you, knowing the resources and the drawbacks of this *ménage*, invite yourself, I am the happiest woman in the world. Where can I send Judy to fetch your luggage?"

"To the Charing Cross," replied Helen. "But could it not lie there till to-morrow, and I could pick it up as I go to the station?"

"It could, but it won't. Perhaps we may keep you more than a night. Little did I know who was adorning my humble sitting-room while I was listening to Amelia Briscowe holding forth with her usual venom. That woman gets worse than ever. If the club were managed on any kind of business lines, we'd run her out. How do you think the boys are looking? Aren't they monsters? And Tim has begun to rebel at my home-made garments. Where he supposes the money is to come from to pay tailors' bills I can't imagine; but he is a dear boy for all that."

"They are all dear boys," said Helen warmly; "but Tony looks like a cherub."

"He isn't, though, he's an imp; but he gets off scot free on account of his cherubic air, which is a fraudulent imposition. Mrs. Garbutt says they are hopelessly vulgar, and I fear they are," said the little story-writer, with a sigh. "But I can't help preferring them to her namby-pamby æsthetic band. Larry is beyond speaking of, Mrs. Woodgate; but he is a perfect genius. He'll distinguish himself yet."

"I am sure of it. I think you are a happy woman to have so many bright young creatures about you," said Helen, with a sigh, and a wistfulness in her eye which stabbed the little story-writer to the heart.

"Oh, I have my cares; but I love the lads, and I wouldn't part with one of them to ride in a coach and six," she said quickly. Then suddenly she looked straightly at Helen and spoke out frankly. "When I look at you, I can't endure it—endure to think of your trouble, I mean. I can't help speaking about it; I'll die if I don't. Isn't there any chance of its being mended? Is it hopeless for ever?"

Helen laid down her head on the shabby arm of the old rocking-chair and burst into tears.

CHAPTER XXXIV

"I have paid thee with the current coin
Men give to women."

THE Countess Hilda arrived, as Helen had arrived, at Reutensee in the afternoon, driving all the way from Würzburg. Her thoughts throughout the journey had been more of Helen than of the sick, perhaps dying, man she had been summoned to see. Perhaps she would not have been in such haste had the summons not come from Helen, and had she not expected to see her at the end of the journey. She had never seen Woodgate, but from time to time Hargreaves had told her of his state of mind, and there was hope in her heart that a reconciliation might be effected soon. If she could help it on, she would feel herself a happier woman than at any moment during the past six weeks. She had not many tender associations with the old Francon Schloss; nevertheless, her artistic eye was pleased as it burst upon her vision that sunshiny May afternoon, and a half smile stole to her lips. It was indeed a sweet and lovely spot, and it held at that moment, as she imagined, the two persons she loved best on earth, Helen Woodgate and her own boy. Of her sick husband she thought surprisingly little; she had not, indeed, realised all that his possible death might involve. Helen's letter had been of the briefest description, simply telling of the Count's critical state, and asking her to come at once. But there had been an undertone of entreaty running through it which Hilda von Reutensee

was quick to detect, and which moved her to instant obedience. The boy Gustav, on the lookout all day long, had seen the carriage come over the distant slopes, and was standing outside the courtyard gates when it came crawling up the steep ascent. He threw himself into his mother's arms, and she, with the tears running down her cheeks, pressed him to her heart, and laid her cheek to his. The child's love was sweet to her; she had hungered for it daily, hourly, since she had last held it there.

"There, there, that will do, child; now let me look at you. How you have grown! nearly as tall as your mother, are you not?" she said smilingly. "But you look strong and well."

"Oh, I am well; and you, mother dearest, are you well? You are tired; the journey from England is so long; but all is well now you have come back to us," said the boy, looking into her face smilingly, and noting a subtle change thereon—the change wrought by weariness and much anxiety of mind.

"And how is your father now?"

"He is very ill," replied the lad; and his bright face shadowed. "Yesterday I was not permitted to see him, and to-day he did not know me. The great man will come again from Würzburg in the evening. Aunt Clothilde bade him not come till evening, as then you might have come."

"You had not gone back to school before your father came, then?" said Hilda, as they walked hand in hand across the courtyard.

"No, I was to go next day, only he said I might stay. Mother, I think papa loves me at last."

She gave a little start, and glanced inquiringly at the young face beside her, noting the eager flush, the bright light in his eyes.

"I hope he always loved you, Gustav," she said gently.

"Perhaps so," replied the lad, with a sigh; "but now I know it. He likes me to be with him, and we talk all the time of you."

His mother covered her eyes a moment, touched, though she

would not own it, even with a vague stirring at her heart for which she could not account.

"There is Aunt Clothilde," she said suddenly. "She looks very ill and aged, poor Aunt Clothilde!"

"Welcome, Hilda; welcome home again," said the old lady, folding her nephew's wife to her heart, and kissing her on both cheeks. "Now will the heart of the boy be at rest; it has been on the wing all day long."

"And Ludwig, Aunt Clothilde; is it true, as Gustav says, that he is so ill to-day?"

"He is far spent; but come in, my daughter. You need rest and refreshment. Gustav, tell Hans to make haste with our coffee."

Countess Hilda stepped into the large, bare, but nobly-proportioned hall, and glanced about her with a slightly inquiring air.

"Mrs. Woodgate is still here, is she not?" she inquired a trifle sharply.

"No; she left us yesterday morning, and is now in England."

The Countess turned her head away, biting her trembling lip, her eyes stinging with the mist of her most bitter disappointment. At length, however, she faced her kinswoman again, looking her very frankly in the face, desiring to learn from its expression how much or how little she knew. And she was quick to gather from the placid unconsciousness of that withered old face, that she was in complete ignorance of her share in the upheaval in Helen Woodgate's life.

"I hoped she would wait at least until I came," she said.

"I urged her to remain, but the child's heart seemed turned to her own land and she could no longer be at rest. But come up, my daughter; we can talk of that and other things while you eat and rest."

"Now tell me about Ludwig, Aunt Clothilde; what has happened to him?" asked Hilda, as they went upstairs. "He was the very last man I should have thought to have been so stricken."

"The strongest are not exempt, Hilda," said the old lady;

"but there is no doubt it came of his own seeking. He fought in a duel at Baden, I understand, over some money matter, though I have heard no particulars, and the wound has been neglected—that is all. The surgeon from Würzburg extracted the ball on Monday, but he is still in a very critical state."

"Is he conscious?"

"Only partially."

"And does he know I am here, or that I had been sent for?"

"No; it was the doing of Mrs Woodgate, Hilda. She said the time had come."

The Countess Hilda slightly curled her lip as she stirred her coffee.

"Fought in a duel, did he? Then he is no better than he was. What does Gustav mean, Aunt Clothilde, by saying his father loves him now? Has sickness so changed Graf Ludwig that he has unbent to the boy?"

"I believe so; and Mrs. Woodgate talked to him, I know. A sweet woman, Hilda, undeserving of such bitter sorrow as has fallen to her lot. Tell me what manner of man is this husband of hers who has treated her so."

"Oh, he is no worse, I suppose, than other men—not so bad as my husband," said Hilda, with a flippancy she was far indeed from feeling. "Only, she is too good for him, totally unfitted always for the life he could offer her. Their marriage was a mistake—that was all. The probability is, however, that this breeze will blow over, and they will settle down to an outward semblance of peace. How long has Ludwig been here?"

"Little more than a week."

"And what do they say? that his case is hopeless? What do you think yourself, Aunt Clothilde?"

"I do not like his look to-day, but when you go to his room you will judge for yourself."

"You look as if you wanted rest—as if you suffered, Aunt Clothilde," said the Countess, and stretching out her firm white hand, she laid it with a tender, sympathetic touch in the old lady's withered fingers. "Our troubles are too much for you."

It is a shame that you should have them so near you always."

"Nay, it is not that, it is bodily weakness. My days are also numbered, and I do not grieve thereat, but rather rejoice, for my treasures are in heaven," said the old woman; and, moved by the unwonted gentleness in the face of the woman she had never understood, she leaned across the table, looking searchingly and yearningly into her face. "Hilda, if Ludwig shows but a gleam of penitence, you will be very gentle with him. It is bad for you, bad for him, but specially bad for the boy, to be thus separated; and we are bidden not to break the bruised reed."

"Who am I that I should break the bruised reed, Aunt Clothilde?" was the reply, and Hilda dashed away a quick tear. "I have lived eight desolate years—long enough to repent me of my share in the unhappy past. I was not blameless, and I will tell him so."

"Thanks be to God!" fell fervently from the lips of the old Gräfin.

"Do you know who has taught me to know myself? Helen Woodgate. I have been her friend not yet a year, but she has shown me that religion is not a mere name, that the spirit of Christ can yet animate a human heart."

"Strange, yet she finds it herself so hard to forgive," said the old Gräfin musingly.

"The shock was too great. It will come in time; this yearning to return, of which you told me, is a sign that the reserve is breaking down. I can only pray he will meet her as she must be met, if the future is to hold any possibilities for either. Now I must go to my room and remove these travel-stained garments before I venture into the sick-chamber. Is anyone with him now?"

"Only one of the maids. He needs no nursing, only watching; and Gustav keeps a faithful guard."

"I shall relieve them both," she answered, with a faint smile, and when she had gone from the room, the old Gräfin sat still by the open window looking out on the placid lake, pondering

these mysteries in her soul. She had so long dwelt with the unseen that the concerns of earth did not greatly trouble her; yet did her heart swell within her at the thought that the white dove of peace had spread her wings over that dishonoured and miserable house, and she prayed with all the passion, the earnestness of those whose prayers prevail, that a brighter dawn might yet arise for Reutensee.

Within an hour Countess Hilda took her place in the sick-chamber. She came down in a soft, noiseless robe of black, relieved by a cross of pearls at the throat, her shining hair knotted low on the nape of her graceful neck, her face sweet with that remarkable sweetness, the compassion of a tender woman's soul. The maid, who rose to leave at her bidding, looked at her in awe, thinking she had never beheld a vision more beautiful, nor a human being look more like an angel. While speaking to the maid, Countess Hilda never glanced towards the bed; and when she had closed and locked the door, she walked over to the window and drew the hangings back, in order that the last radiance of the dying day might illumine the room. Then, with a hurried glance at the red and saffron sky, she stepped back and approached the bed. Her footfall was so noiseless that it sent forth no echo, fell with no disturbing cadence on the sleeper's ear. For Graf Ludwig slept, and, so far as she could judge, it seemed a natural and healing sleep, the breath coming in gentle, easy respirations, and the whole appearance that of returning health. Quite motionless Countess Hilda stood, with her hands clasped before her, looking down upon him, the husband of her youth, the father of her boy. In his sleep something of the innocence of a far-off time had returned to his face; the mouth had lost its weary, cynical, selfish curve, the hard lines were softened, and purity and peace seemed to dwell upon his brow. A broad and noble brow it was, seat of fine powers laid waste in riotous living, index to a soul which had been fed with husks. As the wife, who had never loved him with that saving love which is the redemption of so many men, so regarded him, her heart became as wax within her; and she saw, even yet more clearly than Helen

Woodgate had unconsciously shown her, wherein she had fallen short. Reviewing the past, calmly, justly, mercilessly, she recalled her bitter scorn, her impatience, her hot anger, her repelling of any good impulse he had ever shown; she admitted that she had aided the bitter shipwreck through which she had so keenly suffered. There stole upon her, too, gentler memories of which the early years of her wifehood were not utterly barren. He had sometimes been tender, generous, chivalrous, all a man should be. And he had loved her well; and she knew that it was her indifference, her cold contempt, her unmeasured coldness, which had driven him into company she loathed, and had forced her at last to leave him. As she stood there lashed with the stings of her unmeasurable self-reproach, she saw his lips move, and knew that they formed her name. Then she fell upon her knees, and the noise of her sobbing woke him, and he looked about him in sore wonderment, a moment, his troubled eyes resting upon the sheen of her hair where it lay so near to his hand that he could touch it.

"Is it Hilda?" he said in a weak whisper; then she raised her head and looked at him, and he at her silently. "What does it mean?" he said, with difficulty. "You shall have the boy. I promised him. He can go to you now. Did I not tell him so?"

He comprehended nothing; too weak to wonder how she had come or why, he attributed her tears to the only cause of unhappiness that occurred to him, separation from the boy. She grew calm listening to him, and felt the difficulty of the moment.

"I do not want the boy this time, Ludwig. I have come to see you, to be with you."

"Ah yes, but you shall have him. I promised him. He said you were unhappy. Yes."

He grew drowsy again, closed his eyes, and fell asleep.

CHAPTER XXXV

"As God made women to save men by love."

SHORTLY afterwards the surgeon arrived from Würzburg, prepared to stay the night, but expressed himself so satisfied with the condition of his patient that he changed his intention. The weakness was very great, but the fever had abated, and the sleep had become natural and calm. He was surprised to be received by Graf Ludwig's wife, of whom he had heard as a heartless Englishwoman, utterly unmindful of her wifely duty. The land of her adoption had thus not been less hard upon Hilda von Reutensee than the land of her birth. When he saw her queenly bearing, her lovely face softened by the shade of her deep anxiety, and observed in her close questioning a wifely concern in which he could find no flaw, he went away marvelling, and telling himself the family history of Reutensee was a riddle too hard to read, and that the world, as is its selfish wont, had jumped too hastily to a lame and impotent conclusion. The weakness of the prostrate Graf was indeed very great. For days he lay in that semi-conscious state, sleeping so many of the hours away that but for the surgeon's assurance that it was a health-giving and strength-restoring slumber, they must have felt alarm. Hilda only left his side to take a walk in the pinewoods with the boy, and their talk was all of him. Yet while she suffered Gustav to talk incessantly of his father, to draw glowing

pictures of a reunited and happy future, her own heart had its own weight of misgiving. Restored health might shatter all these dreams, might make it impossible for her to accomplish the resolve she had taken, her new-found desire to try another and a gentler method with her husband might be so chillingly repulsed that it would recoil icily upon her heart. Meanwhile, however, she permitted the child's babble, nay, encouraged it; and in constant contact with his pure innocence, his unassailable belief in all that was lovely and good, her own heart was drawn yet more near to the divine which had till now been but a shadow or a myth to her. For years she had striven to carry out the letter of the work done on earth by the Nazarene, seeking to find in ministry to others some balm for her own hurt; but because her heart had been untouched by His Spirit, her effort unbaptised by the consciousness of His loving approval, it had brought her but a passing joy.

In the world where she lived and moved and had her being, religion was a quality not accredited nor understood. It was simply one of the questions of the day, to be discussed, criticised, weighed in the balance like its fellows. Many Christian deeds were done, it is true, but not in the name of Christ; and the simple faith of Helen Woodgate, which was at once the guide and comfort of her life, had opened up a vista of great surprise to the woman who had made a study of her from curiosity first, and then for love.

Helen had never by word or look suggested that she thought the Countess had erred, or even been harsh in her treatment of her husband. She had accepted in absolute faith the Countess's own assurance that she had found it impossible to live with him, had sympathised with her to the full in her separation from her boy, and had never hinted that there might be another side to the picture. It was this simple faith, this giving of true friendship without a question or a doubt, that had raised for the first time in Hilda von Reutensee's mind a doubt concerning her own attitude as a wife, and had caused her to examine her own feelings, as well as her behaviour in the past. She had been in a sense forced to marry Ludwig

von Reutensee, for whom she had cared nothing, though he had some qualities which might have won a woman's regard. His youth had been wild and wayward, it is true, but his faults had been those of a generous, passionate nature. Then his early environment had been of the worst; he had been from boyhood absolutely master of his own fortunes and resources, being responsible to none. When he married the sweet English girl, it was out of pure and passionate love, which would undoubtedly have saved him had it been returned, or even appreciated. But she, soured in her sweet youth by harsh treatment, and rebelling against her fate, had entered on her married life in a state of mind which augured ill for happiness or peace. From the beginning there was no semblance of either. She exaggerated his faults, and stung him perpetually with reproach; casting contempt even on the national pride, the family honours which are dearer to the German soul than life. He retaliated, as was inevitable, and the breach daily widened, until there was no hope of reconciliation.

The birth of the boy, instead of healing, seemed to aggravate their relations to each other. She, professing open hatred of everything German, insisted that he should be reared and educated in England and on English lines; a grave and absurd contention, seeing he was heir to an honourable German name and a great estate. And so the end had come, and the interval had passed as we have seen.

Helen Woodgate's high ideal of wifely duty, though seemingly but ill appreciated and not rich in fruits, had gradually communicated itself to the woman to whom she had laid bare her heart, awaking in her a great wonder at first, then a vague discontent with herself which forced her to view her own conduct in a light altogether new. She must not be too harshly judged, for she had moved through life during the past years free, unquestioned, absolute as a queen. The creed of those surrounding her was that the queen could do no wrong, and so there had grown up in her a great complacency, which had made her heart hard as the nether millstone. Even Hargreaves, whose eyes refused to see through the eyes of others,

and who was relentless in his condemnation of humbug, had accepted her at her own valuation, and absolutely believed Ludwig, Graf von Reutensee, to be a scoundrel of the first water. Very gradually, during her intimacy with the large, pure-minded, wholesome nature of Helen Woodgate, it had dawned upon Hilda von Reutensee that she had deceived them all, herself included, and that she was a gigantic humbug. So, when Helen wrote, the time was ripe, the harvest was at hand. How ignorant was Helen of this silent process, this wonderful sowing and reaping, due to her alone! She had been down in the depths often, weighed to the very dust with a sense of her own feebleness and impotence, her powerlessness, even with the will, to do good anywhere; and lo! while she moaned, and felt herself beginning to drift like a useless derelict, the silent lesson of her life did its lovely and perfect work. While she sat in Sophia Ryder's shabby little room, weeping, with her head on the old arm-chair, that work received its crown.

Graf Ludwig awoke one evening from his long sleep like a giant refreshed. The great room, which, according to English ideas of comfort, seemed bare and sombre, yet which had its own nobleness of proportion and dignity of arrangement, was bathed in soft, lovely shadows, thrown by the brief twilight which, in Germany, follows so swiftly on the sunset. And at the window, with her arm on the sill, her soft eyes turned yearningly towards the sky and a prayer in them, sat a woman whom he recognised, who had been with him in shadowland these many days—his own wife. He raised himself lightly, and fixed his blue eyes on her, searchingly, yearningly, afraid to ask what her presence there might mean. That he still loved her was written on his face. There is, in spite of a gruffness of exterior, a peculiar softness in the Teuton nature, a keen susceptibility to the dearness and sacredness of family ties. Graf Ludwig had suffered through the shipwreck of his family life more than it is possible for me to say. Her profile was towards him, and if more sharply outlined, it was perfect as of yore; one hand rested on her cheek, and the wide sleeve

of her black gown, with its inner frill of dainty white lace, had fallen back to the rounded elbow, revealing the exquisite contour of her arm.

Of what could she be thinking, he wondered, afraid to move, to disturb that peace, lest some echo of the bitter past should leap up to cut him to the heart. At length, always on the alert, she turned her head, saw his attitude, and rose to her feet. She came over to him swiftly, and a visible trembling shook her. His eyes did not leave her face. They still questioned, questioned hungrily, incessantly.

"At last," she said quite gently, "you are better, Ludwig—much better—are you not?"

She schooled herself to speak calmly, to utter the commonplace, though tragedy stood in the rear; and it was the second, and undoubtedly the last crisis in these two lives.

"I want to know," he said quietly, "why you are here."

"I came to be with you, Ludwig," she made reply. "Is not that sufficient reason?"

"It was very kind of you to leave your brilliant friends to be by the bedside of a sick man, for whom you have no regard," he said; and she could not tell whether he spoke in earnest or in scorn. "I promised Gustav he should go to you now. You can take him back with you if you will."

"I do not think the boy has any longer the desire to come," she said quietly. "Am I not then welcome here, Ludwig? You would be happier rid of me?"

He gave his head an impatient shake, and his mouth hardened. "What use is it to ask such questions? There can never be any talk of welcome between you and me. Everything is over, but I have passed my word you shall have the boy until the service claims him. Had I known you and he were so unhappy, you should have had him ere this. It was nothing to me."

The Countess bit her lip. In face of this calm assumption that she was still of the same mind, it was hard to utter a word of what was in her heart. The fear that she would be repulsed bound her. She was a proud woman, who had never sued to

any; yet her heart went out to him as he lay there, a fine figure even in his weakness, his face wearing a grave, gentle look she had never before seen upon it. The whirlwind of passion was long spent in both hearts; each was weary, and glad to be at peace. Graf Ludwig was conscious of a great and subtle change in his wife, but the cause of it never dawned upon him. It was too impossible a joy to be imagined, but he felt in his weakness glad that she looked upon him so kindly and spoke in such gentle tones, which indicated that the bitterness was past.

"I wish to thank you, Ludwig," she began, a trifle formally, "for your generous kindness to me all these years. I"—

He interrupted her by an impatient wave of his hand.

"Bah, what was that? nothing. The Countess von Reutensee was entitled to such comfort or luxury as the revenues could afford. They were your rights, nothing more; why thank me for that?"

"Rights, nevertheless, which many men in like circumstances would have ignored," she said quietly; "but I wish to tell you that your money has not all been selfishly spent. It has done good to many."

"I care not, so long as you had it to do with as you willed. Why tell me these things?" he said quickly; and as his irritation seemed to increase, her face became gradually more gentle, more lovely in its look.

"I tell you, because when you are well you will like to think of them, because I know your heart is kind," she said. "Yes: Reutensee's money has comforted many a downcast English heart, and given bread to some little children who might otherwise have lacked; and I must thank you, Ludwig, now, if I do not have any other opportunity, for conferring on me that exquisite power to relieve distress."

He regarded her attentively, conscious that there was something behind all this he did not yet comprehend. But he never spoke.

"We have not met, Ludwig, for eight long years," she said nervously. "Do you see any change in me?"

"I have no right to say," he replied; and she smiled, but sadly.

"Am I, then, so changed? Well, a dissatisfied woman, eating her heart out for what might have been, must age quicker than in happier circumstances."

"Age? Well, perhaps, you are aged a little, but you are lovelier than ever, Hilda, and you know it; though why you should provoke me to say such a thing I cannot imagine, unless for your own amusement."

"I am a poor creature in your estimation yet," she said, and turned from him, her eyes swimming in tears. "I came here intending to ask you something, Ludwig, but now I do not think I shall."

The man was sorely puzzled, and did not know how to deal with her, or what to say. The memory of their strange parting still dwelt keenly with him; its bitter words seemed scarred upon his heart. Lo, what a change was here! a change so great as to bewilder.

"I can do no less than listen courteously to anything you have to say to me, Hilda," he replied; "I can at least promise you that."

She turned to him then, and he saw her tears. Standing close by the bed, with her white hands on its rich hangings, she looked down upon him and uttered the words she had long conned in her heart.

"I wish to ask forgiveness for my share in the bitter past. The desolate years have taught me that I was far from blameless, and in the interval you have been more generous than I."

These words seemed to work in him a strange distress; they were so totally unexpected, he could find no answer to them.

"No, no; the fault was mine, mine alone. I never blamed you, my poor wife; only it was a mistake, a mistake from the beginning, and for which we must suffer all our lives. Had I been a better husband to you, it might have been different."

"Do not say all our lives, Ludwig," she cried, falling on her knees beside him and laying her hot cheek against his long, thin white hand. "Let us try it again for the child's sake."

Let us bury the past and begin anew. You will find me a changed woman, for oh, those desolate years have nearly broken my heart!"

Her words thrilled him, but the touch of her cheek in his hand was like an electric shock, awakening in him all the passion of the love which estrangement had not quenched.

"Do you know what you are saying, Hilda?" he said hoarsely. "I am no better a man than I was. I have been guilty of many follies."

"Yes, yes, but you will give them all up because I ask you," she said, and her lips touched his now trembling hand. "We will have no recrimination, we will let the past be as a sealed book for ever. There will be only the future: we can make it good, perhaps even happy. God has shown me my heart, Ludwig; and perhaps a loving woman may help you where a bitter, unloving one hindered. Let us try it. I am tired of being alone."

Then a radiance as of a new and glorious dawn arose on the face of Ludwig von Reutensee, and he tried, though but feebly, to draw his wife nearer to him.

"You are in earnest, Hilda? It is not pity of my weakness? You will say the same when I am well?" he said breathlessly.

"So help me God, I will, and till the end of my life, if only you will love me a little, Ludwig, and help me to be good."

It was the appeal of all appeals to move him; he could only clasp her closer, without a spoken word.

The boy Gustav presently crept timidly to the door and looked in, his sweet face grave with all the anxiety of a loving heart. The shadows had deepened in the quiet room, but there was light enough for him to see that his father was awake, and that his mother lay across the bed, with her golden head upon his breast.

CHAPTER XXXVI

"This life I live—intolerable."

IM RYDER was a true specimen of the London boy. He was at home in the streets, and found the keenest enjoyment in wandering about, with eyes and ears open for anything startling, comic, or pathetic. Nothing escaped him; he had the gift of a large observation, and an imagination equal to the supply of every missing link. As might be expected from his nationality and his peculiar temperament, the queer side of things was usually the first to present itself to his vision, and many a quaint bit did Tim carry home from the streets to the little house in Bloomsbury, giving to Aunt Sophy many an inspiration which redeemed her work from the dead level of sentimental commonplace. Sophia Ryder had had a hard life, and sordid care was beginning to tell on her; she could not now so absolutely lose herself in her work as to be able to shut out the grim details of the problem which faced her daily, how to live, feed, clothe, and educate a family on a microscopic and very precarious income. She loved all her boys, but Tim was more especially her chum, in the sense that he took the liveliest possible interest in her stories, faithfully read and as faithfully believed in. When he came across a bit which he recognised as his own providing, he was highly delighted, and felt quite a proprietary interest in it. Therefore his leisure was spent in haunting the streets for copy, though he had never heard the

word, and if he generally embellished his experiences and observations in a most outrageous fashion, well, it but proved that the mantle of his aunt had descended on him, and that in all probability the name of Tim Ryder might yet appear on the title-page to rival hers. Behold him, then, standing about four o'clock in the afternoon outside the Holborn Viaduct Railway Station, with his hands in his pockets, taking his observations of the constant stream of passengers being taken up and set down within the portico. The Viaduct Station was a favourite vantage-ground of Tim's, and the policemen and porters had become tolerant and even friendly. Though he sometimes lingered for hours, nobody ever bade him "move on," and there was something irresistibly comic, but at the same time pathetic, in the appearance of the big overgrown lad, with the exceedingly short and skimp trousers, which gave undue prominence to a pair of tolerably-sized feet; the shabby jacket, whose sleeves also revealed an abnormal length of bony wrist, and the round, merry, freckled face, which was the only bit of him that could be called fat. It was the eyes that did it; they could beg indulgence from a heart of stone. A train from Margate had just come in, and Tim was in his glory watching the hubbub, when suddenly he caught sight of a familiar face—two, indeed—Hargreaves and Mr. Woodgate walking side by side and talking very gravely. Hargreaves and Tim caught sight of each other simultaneously. "Hulloa! there's Tim Ryder," he said, and came up to shake hands in a very friendly fashion, he being a frequent visitor at that little house in Craddock Street, and a prime favourite with the inmates. "How's all at home? You've seen Tim, haven't you, Woodgate?" he added, turning to Woodgate; "Miss Ryder's nephew."

"Yes; he's been at Hampstead, I believe, several times," said Woodgate, a trifle absently, and Tim laid a limp paw in the outstretched hand and surveyed him doubtfully, and yet with a new curiosity.

The Ryders had not taken kindly to Woodgate, who had not the knack of winning young hearts; and in private, indeed,

they took the unpardonable liberty of dubbing the great novelist "the solemn duffer."

"How's your aunt?—well, I hope? busy, I suppose, as usual?" said Hargreaves cheerily.

"Not writing; we've had a lady stopping with us for three days—Mrs. Woodgate," said Tim boldly, and glancing in his surreptitious Irish fashion at Woodgate's face, upon which this announcement had a very striking effect.

"Mrs. Woodgate?" he repeated, giving Tim a lightning glance. "Do you mean my wife?"

"Yes; she went away to-day."

"Where?" asked Woodgate, and his voice took a curious hoarse note, and the colour fluctuated in his face.

"I don't know, but Scotland, I think; at least, Aunt Soph went to Euston with her this morning. We were jolly sorry when she went away, and I believe Tony's blubbing yet."

Woodgate took Hargreaves by the arm and drew him a little aside.

"What on earth, Harry, can be the meaning of this?"

"It's hopeful, Dick; cheer up. Her heart's turned home. We must consider what's to be done."

"I must see Miss Ryder at once, that's certain. Will you take the things to Norfolk Street, and the boy can go with me?"

Hargreaves nodded. Scarcely one hour ago they had had confirmation that Woodgate's means had all been swallowed up in one of the gigantic swindles which are the curse of modern times, and Hargreaves could not help an inward smile, seeing how completely this new announcement had driven the other out of his head.

So Tim, to his own consternation, found himself presently bundled into a hansom beside Mr. Woodgate, who gave his aunt's address, but he never addressed a single remark to the boy, and Tim wondered why he had been taken into custody, though he enjoyed the ride, it having the charm of extreme novelty.

Sophia Ryder was yawning over her manuscripts at her desk,

finding the labour, after Helen Woodgate's company, very stale, flat, and unprofitable, and longing for tea-time and a romp with the boys, when the hansom rattled up to the door. And when Woodgate came walking into the little hall, she was so overcome that she could only clasp her hands and cry incoherently—

"Oh, Mr. Woodgate, you're just a day too late; she went off this morning!"

"I know, but I want to talk to you. Here, my boy," he said, extracting a crown piece from his pocket and handing it to Tim; "go and spend it, and leave me with your aunt."

Tim looked at it doubtfully, and, with a whoop, disappeared. Aunt Sophy was too agitated to relieve him of it, or even to send a provident caution after him, as she certainly would have done on an ordinary occasion; but Tim had something else in his head besides lollipops or even clasp-knives—something which he knew his aunt coveted, and which should be hers that very day.

Aunt Sophy opened the sitting-room door and invited Woodgate to walk in, which he did.

"I want to hear how my wife happened to come here, where she came from, and what are her plans, if you know them," he said simply, and sat down, looking like a man who meant what he said. He seemed so very unhappy that the susceptible heart of the little Irishwoman instantly melted towards him, though she had inwardly anathematised him many times during the last three days.

"She came from Reutensee, Mr. Woodgate. I was as surprised to see her as you can possibly be to hear that she has been here, and I saw her off at Euston this morning. She took a ticket to Hallkirk."

"To Hallkirk? Did her relatives expect her?"

"No. She didn't write; she seemed not to know or care what became of her, and she couldn't. You go after her, Mr. Woodgate, and bring her back, because I don't know what is to become of her; indeed I don't."

The little story-writer was amazed at her own temerity in thus addressing a man whom she knew so slightly, and of whom she stood considerably in awe. Woodgate's mouth twitched. He was sensitive and proud, and though he was in an extremity, it cost him dear to discuss this matter with Sophia Ryder. He suddenly turned to her and looked her fully in the face, deciding that now he had come, the only course was to be perfectly frank with her.

"Miss Ryder, you and I are comparative strangers to each other, but I know that you and my wife have been very friendly—that she has lived here for three days proves it. I presume she spoke of me. Would you advise me to follow her to Scotland?"

The little story-writer hesitated and looked confused. Helen had talked with sufficient frankness to her to convince her that she was not yet ready to return to her home and her husband. She had confessed herself miserably unhappy, it is true, but had seemed to be in no doubt as to her indifference, which she assured Sophy was superb. Woodgate observed her hesitation, and from it drew his own conclusions.

"You have answered me," he said, a trifle bitterly, "and my passing hope is extinguished. You can, at least, tell me how she looked."

"Not well. She is haggard and worn, and something will have to be done, or she'll die, I do believe," said Sophia emphatically.

Woodgate winced, but did not feel alarmed. He knew that Helen possessed in a remarkable degree her countrywomen's staying power, but it hurt him keenly to hear that she looked ill; her perfect health had always been one of her charms. He rose to his feet, feeling that he had better go, yet lingering, a thousand questions on his lips. He looked round the shabby little room which Helen's presence had so lately glorified, and regarded with envy the odd little woman who had parted from her only a few hours before. Yes, it had come to that with Woodgate; he now prized what he had lost beyond any earthly thing. He had come to himself, and was now a man

of one idea, one aim, one purpose in life—to win again the woman he had lost.

“Will she write to you, do you think?”

“She promised to do so, in a day or two.”

“And she came direct from Reutensee? Do you know whether the Countess had arrived before she left?”

“No; they passed each other on the way.”

“And she has gone to her sister, I suppose—to Mrs. Douglas, at Broadyards?”

“That was the address she gave me,” said the little story-writer, and the pity of the whole matter dwelt so keenly with her that she could scarcely trust herself to do more than answer the questions briefly as they were put. She had never been so favourably drawn towards Woodgate, had not heretofore credited him with the possession of a heart; and, blaming herself for her too harsh and hasty judgment, she longed to help him, and yet there was no way.

“Well, I suppose I had better go. I am very much obliged to you, Miss Ryder, for your courtesy to me to-day, and also for your kindness to my wife.”

“Oh, that’s nothing—nothing at all. I was unspeakably honoured in having her here; but oh, I hope everything will come right, for it’s awful that things should be so—perfectly awful!”

Woodgate faintly smiled, but his eyes were grave. It was the first time he had mentioned Helen’s name to a human being except Hargreaves, and none had dared mention it to him. But Sophia Ryder was a woman, and her sympathy was sweet; then, she had Helen’s confidence and friendship, which entitled her to his reverence.

“They may come right. I, who have transgressed, may yet be allowed to atone,” he said, with a look which finally and completely won the soft heart of the little story-writer. “Good-bye; and again I thank you from my heart.”

She followed him to the door, wiping her eyes openly with the corner of her housewifely apron.

“Oh, Mr. Woodgate, I heard an impossible rumour at the

club on Friday, that you had lost all your money in that scandalous Altona business. Of course there isn't a word of truth in it?—excuse my asking.”

“It is quite true. I believe I am at this moment a penniless man, Miss Ryder; but what of that?”

“Oh, I am sorry. I hope it may turn out better than is anticipated. You may get it back.”

“I may, when I am too old for it to do any good,” he said. “Don't trouble about me; many worse things befall a man than the loss of his money. Will you permit me to come and see you again when I am in London?”

“Why, certainly; I am only too pleased and honoured,” she said quickly, gratified by the compliment. Then he shook hands and went his way.

The little story-writer went back to her desk and took up her pen. She had once longed to witness a bit of genuine human tragedy; now that she had stood face to face with it in the persons of Richard and Helen Woodgate, she did not find it of such substantial aid as she expected. In fact, it so distracted her that the march of her story stood still for a whole week.

CHAPTER XXXVII

"She, being wise and good and born above
The flats I've never climbed from."



WOODGATE went back to Hargreaves rooms in Norfolk Street, to find him engrossed in the correspondence which had accumulated in his absence.

"Well, what cheer?" he asked, throwing himself back in his chair and surveying his friend keenly. "Did you find the little woman at home?"

Woodgate nodded, took a pipe from the mantel, and began to fill it in silence.

"She's gone back to her own people, Harry; and, meanwhile, that is the conclusion of the whole matter," he said at length.

Hargreaves nodded his head two or three times, pondering the thing in his mind.

"Good little soul, Sophy Ryder," he said suggestively.

"Very," assented Woodgate, quite warmly for him. "Heavens, what a struggle she must have had!"

His own troubles were making Woodgate sympathetic, as he had never yet been for the cares of others. There is nothing so arrogant as success, and so hardening to certain natures, which require a special baptism of grace to make them tolerable. Let no man say adversity has not its uses; it is one of the benedictions of life, recognised only, it is true, when it has done its appointed work, and sometimes not even

then. Yet its ministry remains, its saving grace is still apparent in the souls of men.

Woodgate had never known care even of the lightest kind, and seeing its gradual influence upon him, Hargreaves rejoiced that it had overtaken him. Even he, of late years, had begun to regard Woodgate with despair, as an example of fine powers laid waste by a complete selfish complacency which nothing could assail, and which is death to all noble effort.

"She has had a struggle, but she fights nobly, and she has her compensations. There is more heroism in that odd little creature than in twenty ordinary men and women," said Hargreaves. "And through it all she has kept a simple faith in God and a belief in humanity which more than one of us might envy."

"Women are different from us, Harry. They deal more with the ideal than with the real, and are more easily satisfied. I seem only to begin to understand the feminine portion of the race, though I have written of them with the superb assumption of ignorance for years."

"But your creatures were mere puppets, Dick," said Hargreaves cheerfully; "not creatures of flesh and blood at all. Why, that little thing you read the other night at the Albion had more life in it than all the books you have ever written."

"I don't suppose," said Woodgate meditatively, as he puffed slowly at his pipe, "that I shall ever write another book."

"And what will you do for a living then?" queried Hargreaves; "since is it demonstrated beyond a doubt that the Altona has swallowed up all your present resources."

Woodgate grimly smiled.

"Faith, I don't know. I suppose I shall earn a crust somewhere and somehow. It'll be a new sensation anyhow, and isn't that what half the race are grasping after, eh?—a new sensation."

"I doubt you won't relish it. Have you thought of anything?"

"Not I. I once had a profession at my finger-ends, but it's gone. I daresay I could sit on an office stool and tot up figures;

that requires no special aptitude, and I daresay I'll find some one to give a poor devil a job for old times' sake. And it doesn't take much to keep a single man in digs like this."

Hargreaves indulged himself in a huge but inaudible laugh.

"Not very much ; but a sight more than you'd ever earn on an office stool, Dick. Faith, I'd think twice about giving you such a job myself, even for old times' sake."

Hargreaves perceived that changed circumstances had not yet become a reality to Woodgate, and that he still regarded them from an outsider's point of view.

"I could prophesy for you, but I won't," he said. "Aren't you going to tell me what Sophy Ryder said about Mrs. Woodgate?"

Woodgate took his pipe from his mouth, and regarded Hargreaves for a full minute in serious silence.

"There isn't anything to tell, Harry, and I didn't question much, as you can well imagine. But from the little she did say, I gathered that my wife had gone back to her own friends in anything but a forgiving frame of mind. I am more hopeless than I was. I am held in very poor estimation about Broadrule, and the influences brought to bear upon her there will be decidedly against me. I am not grumbling, Harry, Heaven knows. I deserve it all ; but I think she might have given me just one chance—granted me an interview to try to explain."

Hargreaves thought so too, but held his tongue. Helen's continued resentment had puzzled him, and having been a witness to Woodgate's reverses and depression of soul, his sympathy was now more with him.

"I cannot for the life of me understand why she went to Reutensee, of all places in the world. I should like to be at the bottom of that," said Woodgate presently.

"I suppose nothing would be gained by following her to Scotland?" suggested Hargreaves ; and for answer Woodgate took out his pocket-book.

"It would take a man possessed of more courage than I to go in the face of that," he said, handing him the small, thin envelope, bearing Helen's handwriting and the Reutensee

postmark, the answer to his appeal. Hargreaves had not seen it, did not even know he had received it; it had rankled so bitterly in Woodgate's mind that he had not felt tempted to talk of it. It was a poor, cold answer to the letter which had cost him a night's agony to write. Hargreaves took it slowly from its cover, and was chilled at once by the manner of its commencement.

"What you ask is impossible," it began abruptly. "I am willing to accept your assurance of regret for the past, but the future does not appear in any way clear to me. If you will cast your memory back to that afternoon at Brighton, you must admit that there were some things said then you will find it very hard to explain away. In my present frame of mind, to return as you desire would be worse than folly, and would certainly end in a more hopeless and irrevocable separation. I do not wish to be unforgiving; I try not to be, but there is no use pretending to a serenity of mind I do not feel. There is nothing for it but to let matters go on as they are. You need not concern yourself about me, and, above all, do not send me money. If you do, I shall certainly return it. If I ever do change, and see things in a different light, I shall consider it my duty to let you know. Meanwhile, pray leave me in peace.—H. W."

"By Jove!" said Hargreaves, when he came to the signature, and, without another word, he read it through again.

"Pretty hot, isn't it?" asked Woodgate, as he replaced it in his pocket-book. "Fancy subjecting oneself to hearing such things spoken by word of mouth. It needs more courage than I possess. I can only wait, like Micawber, for something to turn up."

"She's awfully cut up, Dick. Upon my word, my heart bleeds for her."

"Don't I know it? I know her better than you. I can follow every working of her mind. She's had a most awful shock, Harry; it'll take her years to recover from it. And, you see, being so different from any woman you and I have ever seen, so absolutely unique in her uprightness and loyalty to

truth, she lays a great deal too much stress on what she overheard. She knows nothing of the whirlwinds of passion that shake some men's souls, and yet pass, leaving but little trace behind. I question if it would ever be possible to convince her that a man says things in such moments which have no permanent significance. Hers is a difficult nature to deal with among the quicksands of ordinary life."

Again Hargreaves gravely and silently nodded. He was thinking of the change in Woodgate, the sympathetic tone in which he spoke of his wife, and his niceness of perception regarding her state of mind. Before he could break the silence, the boy brought in a letter, bearing a foreign stamp and the prim, strong, characteristic handwriting of Hilda von Reutensee. He opened it at once, glanced hastily over its brief contents, and after a moment's hesitation passed it on to Woodgate. It ran thus :—

"SCHLOSS VON REUTENSEE,
May 24th.

"DEAR MR. HARGREAVES,—I promised to let you know how I found matters here, but I have been much engrossed. My husband is still very poorly, but his physicians are agreed that his ultimate recovery is sure. It is not likely I shall return to London all summer, and there are some things I will ask you to do for me concerning the house in Park Lane. If you could hear of a tenant for it, for the remainder of the season, I should not mind. I think, on second thoughts, I shall write to Henley, and tell him to let it if possible. This will doubtless surprise you, but not so much as another announcement I have to make, that my husband and I have agreed to try double harness once more, and that I am a happier woman to-day than I have been in all the years you have known me.

"Did you see Mrs. Woodgate as she passed through London? It is all I dare to ask.—Yours sincerely,

"HILDA VON REUTENSEE."

Woodgate laid the letter down without comment and rose to his feet.

"I'm going out to Hampstead, Harry, to have a look at some of the personal effects I want to remove. Could your landlady put me up, do you think? The Metropole is rather beyond me now."

"Oh yes; she has rooms on the upper floor. Want me to go out with you?"

"Not to-day; we'd talk and do nothing; and I don't want to linger over the business, the sooner it's over the better. Would you mind asking the landlady to step up here a minute? May as well make arrangements and be done with it. I must put up somewhere, and I won't bore you any more than I can help."

"Oh, you won't bore me; there's a key in my lock," said Hargreaves serenely. "I'll go down and interview Mrs. Figges first; she requires manipulation."

Hargreaves picked himself up and retired; and when he was left alone, Woodgate took up the Countess's letter and glanced over it again. It had not surprised him so much as it had surprised Hargreaves, and it had moved him not at all. Only he told himself that it was the bitter irony of fate that *that* reconciliation which had appeared remote, if not altogether impossible, should have been effected, while the gulf seemed to widen daily between him and his wife.

"Mrs. Figges is amenable," said Hargreaves as he re-entered the room, "on my affidavit that you are sober and won't give trouble. She'll have the rooms ready for you this evening. When will you be back?"

"I can't say. I'll take a hansom out and bring back some things with me. I'll turn up before dark. Good-bye just now."

Hargreaves knew that Woodgate had not been at the Manor House for weeks, and he knew that the visit to the deserted home must of necessity be painful, but how painful he had no idea.

It was one of the loveliest of May days, and the Hampstead lanes were redolent with the sweet odours of lilac, laburnum, and May, which hung rich and fragrant in every garden. There were many quaint, delightful, old-fashioned

gardens in these lanes and by-ways, but none more quaint and delightful than the Manor House, because it was adorned with so many old trees, which gave it seclusion and a very special charm.

Those old trees were the nesting-places of many birds, and though it was nearing sunset as Woodgate drove through the gates, the air was filled with innumerable twitterings, the low brooding melody of bird motherhood, one of the sweetest of nature's sounds. The gardener and his wife, who formerly lived in the lodge, now inhabited the basement quarters of the house, and acted as caretakers, puzzling and shaking their heads many times over the change they could not understand. The gardener was busy on the lawn when the hansom drove up, and he made haste to welcome his master, full of garrulous talk, but Woodgate cut him short. He was in no mood to listen; he had a task to perform, one which would harrow up his soul. When he found himself within, surrounded in every room by the personal memorials of his wife, and tried to bring himself down to the task of selection, he found it beyond him. In the little morning-room, where so many of their happiest hours had been spent, he sat down and looked about him helplessly. Everything there was hers; above the mantel hung a portrait of her father, and all the little ornaments that had come from the manse of Broadrule. Her favourite books were fitted on a little table in the corner, her work-basket close by, its daintily-worked cover a trifle dingy with the dust of weeks. Her spirit seemed to pervade the place, her voice seemed to speak to him, and the accents were harsh, distant, such as he had never heard from her lips. So strongly was this consciousness of her presence with him, that he looked round with a half start as if expecting to see her. It seemed to bid him behold the ruins of the home they had built up together with such pride, and to blame him mercilessly for it all. It was an intolerable moment to the man, wrought up as he was to a height of nervous excitement. At last, moved by an uncontrollable impulse, he drew his chair up to her writing-table and began a second letter, giving vent to all that was in his heart. He

told her of his changed fortune, of his object in visiting the house, of his inability to choose what she might wish to keep, and he asked her to give him some directions to guide him, if she could not come and make the selection herself; and before he closed it, he abased himself at her feet as he had never yet done, and allowed the whole yearning of his soul to find a voice.

In conclusion, he said that if he received no reply, he should never again trouble her, and when it was written and sealed, he felt himself relieved. The place was haunted for him, memories most bitter and sweet lay in wait for him in every room; he almost expected to hear the rustle of her gown, to have the faint fragrance of her favourite perfume wafted to him with the opening of every door. He could not stay, and passing out to the garden, he exchanged a few words with the old man, entrusted him with his letter to post, and returned empty-handed as he had come.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

"Get leave to work, in this world
'Tis the best you get at all."



THE boys were all at school, Judy preparing the midday meal, and the little story-writer at her desk one forenoon a week later, when Woodgate paid his second visit to the humble domicile. During that week Miss Ryder's work had made but poor progress, and she was that morning in an unusually despondent mood. She sat back in her shabby old arm-chair, with her elbows on the arms and her finger-tips meeting before her nose, the picture of perplexity and disgust. She wore an old calico morning gown, very clean and neat, but remarkably skimpy; her grey hair was brushed tightly back from her temples, and her spectacles on her nose, in which costume and attitude she looked very old indeed. Woodgate came in the opposite direction from the sitting-room window, so that Sophia did not see him come, and Judy ushered him straight in with her customary lack of ceremony. But Miss Ryder was not at all put out, though she jumped to her feet all in a flutter, as usual.

"Oh, Mr. Woodgate, how do you do? I'm so glad to see you—pray sit down. Judy, I do wish you'd keep that kitchen door shut and that window open when you're cooking onions. Try the old rocker, Mr. Woodgate; and how do you do?"

"I'm very well, thank you. How are you?"

"Only so so," said the little story-writer, returning to her

perch in the office chair, from which her small feet dangled about twelve inches from the ground. "I'm face to face with an awful possibility, Mr. Woodgate; so awful that it nearly paralyses me. I believe I'm played out."

Woodgate cast a sympathetic glance at the littered desk, and smiled encouragingly.

"Oh, not a bit of it, we all feel that occasionally. You only want rest, or change of occupation at least, to give you a new inspiration."

"It's very good of you to say so, and I hope you may be right," she said, shaking her head dolefully. "But positively I haven't an idea left. I've got a duke into a corner, and I can't get him out of it; very disrespectful to the duke, isn't it? but how can *I* help it? I was just feeling, when you came in, that I should like to slaughter them all. Tim says I mustn't, and that he may think of something at school?"

"Does Tim collaborate?" inquired Woodgate, both amazed and touched.

"Oh, bless you, yes; without that boy I might as well shut up shop. You see," she added, with a little sigh, "I've been at it so long, my ideas have got a little thin. This is my thirty-seventh three-volume novel, Mr. Woodgate—think of that!"

Woodgate did think of it, and of his own two-and-thirty years of indolence, and there was a sick pang at his heart. How mean and little and empty seemed those years to him, set against the brave toil involved in the words "thirty-seven three-volume novels." Perhaps the world had never heard of them, and the greater lights among her literary sisters sometimes had their laugh at the little story-writer's oddities; but we who believe in the Eternal know that her stress, her heartaches, her bitter mourning over many failures are treasured in heaven, where also awaits her an exceeding great reward. In the great mass of selfishness, of bitter strife and envying, of all uncharitableness which characterise new Grub Street as it characterised the old, there is a little leaven unrecognised by the great ones whom the critics delight to honour, and whose art passes every

standard. And it is found in the work done by such as Sophy Ryder; despised on earth, but hallowed by holiest self-sacrifice, and hall-marked in heaven.

"I believe that Tim may become a second Charles Lever if he fulfils his present promise," said Miss Ryder, waxing brighter with a brighter theme. "His humour is most diverting,—thoroughly Irish, of course, but he just brims over with it,—and he has such a loving heart. If he knew what a forenoon I've had with these tiresome people getting themselves into such scrapes, and not making the slightest attempt to get themselves out again, I don't believe he'd take a bite of dinner, and it takes a good deal to put a boy past his dinner, as you'd know to your cost if you had my weekly bills to pay. And what about the Altona?" She broke off suddenly, the word "bills" bringing Woodgate's money troubles suddenly to her remembrance. "I hope it isn't so bad as they say."

"It is quite as bad, and I am, financially speaking, a ruined man," said Woodgate, so philosophically that Miss Ryder looked at him with a delighted nod.

"I'm sorry to hear it, but really you look as if you rather enjoyed it," she said apologetically. "And then, you see, all you have to do is to write a new book and they table down thousands to you."

"That's a very roseate view of the case," said Woodgate, impelled to smile.

"But isn't it true? Why, look at me! I only got £30 for a three-volume story. Of course, I can write one in six weeks. I wrote four last year, but it's pretty hard work, and then that's only £120. I have three London letters to write in the week for provincial papers, and several ladies' columns. You see I must, because it costs so much to live."

Woodgate got up, because he could not sit still. That simple record of incessant and brain-wearing toil almost unmanned him. He possessed keen feelings, but had always carefully spared them by keeping away from all that was likely to harrow them. But he had never been ungenerous with money; nobody had ever appealed to him in vain; but he

had made a point of refusing to hear details because he did not like unpleasant things. What wonder, then, that his later books had lacked the power to touch the human heart? They were the work of a man who knew very little of human nature, nothing at all of the ordinary current of human life. It is the shadow which throws out the sweetness and pleasantness of the sunshine. How, then, could Woodgate, who walked always on the sunny side, give the fine shading which is the test of all true art?

"It's intolerable that such things should be," he said, almost passionately, thinking that a week or two ago he had the power to relieve permanently all this harassing care, and that now, when he had the will, the power was no longer his. "Is there no other, no easier way for you than that? It is a wonder you are alive."

"Oh, I'm tough," said the little story-writer, with her queer laugh. "It takes a lot to kill an Irishwoman, and I can't die till the boys are up, for there's nothing but the workhouse for them. But, dear me! how terrible of me to inflict all this upon you! I do assure you I'm not grumbling, and that I enjoy my work immensely; only that duke has worked me up this morning, and I was bound to let it out on somebody."

"How old is the youngest boy?" he inquired.

"Tony? Oh, only seven, and somehow I grudge him growing up, he was such a winsome baby. I got him in long clothes, so he seemed almost like my very own baby. I'm not in a hurry for them to grow up, I assure you, and it is delightful to think I am so much use in the world that I can keep together a home for them. Just think of the multitudes of women who have nothing to live for. And then Larry is so splendidly provided for. I can never be grateful enough for that, and though he is a scamp for mischief, he's got cleverness in him, and is going to do credit to his old auntie and the blessed woman who has given him such a chance."

Woodgate did not ask who the lady was, nor was he thinking of it. Little did Sophia Ryder dream that she was dropping seed which would yet bear its abundant fruit, that

never in her life had she done a better morning's work. Pouring out her own troubles, conscious of nothing but a sense of relief that they fell on sympathetic ears, she had given a strong and heavenward impetus to a human soul.

"I came to ask you to do something for me this morning, Miss Ryder," said Woodgate presently. "But when I hear what you have on your shoulders already, I hesitate."

"Oh, pray don't," she cried earnestly. "I can always find time for extra things. It's only people who have nothing to do who never have any time. That's one of the amusements I get at the club, hearing all their cackle about work, when they don't begin to know its primary meaning—that is, some of them. Well, what is it?"

"My house at Hampstead must be sold, of course, and all it contains," he said, keeping his face averted, for he could not help an odd change passing over it. "But there are many things in it which belong exclusively to my wife: her father's study furniture, among other things, and all her own books. I want you to go over to the house with me, and help me to select all you think she would like."

Sophia Ryder sat still, with a very grave look on her face.

"I appreciate the compliment you pay me very highly, Mr. Woodgate," she said at length, with a little nervous tremor in her voice. "But why don't you write to your wife, and ask her to come and look after her own things? Nobody can possibly do it for her with any satisfaction."

"I have written," replied Woodgate, without turning round, "a week ago, laying the whole facts of the case before her, and begging an immediate reply. None has come."

"It may come yet," said Miss Ryder hopefully. "Tony had a box of Scotch sweets from her this morning."

"In that case there will be no answer," said Woodgate, a slight hardness creeping into his voice. "I told her the matter was urgent, and I also said that if she did not reply within the week, I should know she had no wish in the matter. Still, the things are hers, and I should like to keep them, in case she may regret her decision."

"Well, I'll go. There isn't anything in the world I wouldn't do for her, and I can't understand it," said Miss Ryder, with a perfectly audible sob.

"I don't suppose," said Woodgate, turning round at length, "that you have an empty room where the things could be stored meanwhile?"

"Yes; I have three of them on the top floor, and you're welcome to them, I'm sure, as long as you like."

"I'll pay, of course, just as I should pay elsewhere, and I should feel that they were safe here. A few of them are valuable in themselves; all are precious to her, or used to be. Anyhow, I cannot reconcile myself to letting them go."

"You are right, perfectly right. Judy shall wash out the top floor this very day, and make it clean and sweet for these precious things, though I'll see them come in with a sad heart."

"I am certainly obliged to you. You have been a true friend to one who has little deserved your friendship."

"Oh, don't mention it—pray don't—or I don't know what I shall do. May I ask what you are going to do?"

"I have taken rooms, meanwhile, where Hargreaves is, and when I get things settled a bit, I'm going to work."

"Well, I'm sure! Work for your daily bread, I suppose, just as I do. Fortune is a fickle jade; but you'll never come to my straits, because you've gained a great reputation, and everybody's gasping for your things."

"That has to be proved, Miss Ryder. It is when a man most wants countenance he doesn't get it; but, anyhow, I must live, as you say, and your example has inspired me this very day."

The little story-writer blushed like a schoolgirl at this compliment, as genuine as it was sweet. "Do you know I used to stand quite in awe of you?" she said confidentially, as she got off her chair to bid him good-bye. "And now I think you quite different, and I'm quite sure everything will come right. I'm going to pray for it with all my might."

"You believe in prayer still, then?" He asked the

question in all sincerity, and turned to look at her as she followed him into the little hall.

"Why, yes; if I didn't believe in prayer, I'd have given up long ago. All the good things I've ever got in this world have come in answer to prayer."

Woodgate looked down into the plain face of that little plain woman with distinct envy.

"You are to be congratulated that the hardness of life has not robbed you of your faith in all we do not see and cannot understand," he said quietly. "Good-bye, Miss Ryder. You have done me good this morning, and if you have not done much at your desk, you may have wrought a better work in a human soul."

So he went his way, and the little story-writer went back to her desk, as she had done the day Helen left; and her mind was so full of the real pathos of life, that to treat of the unreal and imaginary seemed more impossible than ever. What, then, did she do? She laid her head down upon the page where she had left the duke in an impossible situation, and poured out her heart for the two who engrossed all her thoughts.

The observant Tim, seeing a peculiarly soft and sunshiny look on his aunt's face at dinner-time, concluded she had got over her dilemma, and therefore attacked his shepherds' pie with all the zest of a hungry schoolboy.

CHAPTER XXXIX

“Earth has no home for hearts so worn and weary ;
Life has no second spring for such a year.”

BRIAN LAIDLAW had been visiting a patient in Branksome Dene, and was returning to Hallkirk at the close of the afternoon. It had been raining heavily when he left Broadrule, and he had therefore driven in a covered trap instead of in an open gig, or riding, as was his wont. But now the rain had gone off, and it was a glorious evening, with a touch of delicious coolness in the air, which was crystal clear, imparting vigour with every breath. Branksome Glen was looking its loveliest, with the young leaves on the trees, and the smell of the ripening summer teeming from every furrow. As the doctor's trap bowled smoothly on towards the station at Hallkirk, the London train steamed in with a great noise and puff, twenty minutes late.

“Just run up, Tom, and see whether there's a parcel lying for me. It's a small one, we can take it with us ; it will save sending down specially.”

Tom touched his hat, leaped from the box, while his master stood up and took the reins. Many people passing had a greeting for the popular doctor, and more than one stopped to ask how he was, and how it fared with the old gentleman, who was now seldom seen within the confines of the town.

Tom came back in about five minutes, carrying the parcel,

and at the same time looking with a touch of evident inquiry at the various vehicles, private and hired, waiting for the passengers.

"I was looking for a Broadyards machine, sir," he explained. "I saw Mrs. Woodgate on the platform, and there isn't anybody that I can see to meet her."

"Mrs. Woodgate? Nonsense, Tom! you must have made a mistake," his master answered, but not without a great start of surprise. "I saw Mr. Douglas this morning, and he never said she was coming."

"I didn't make no mistake, sir. I touched my hat to her, and she bowed just as she used to."

"I'll go and see," said Brian, vaulting over the low steps. "If it is really Mrs. Woodgate, and there's nobody to meet her, we can take her up."

A few strides took Brian to the station-house door, on the threshold of which he met Helen face to face.

"It is really you, Mrs. Woodgate!" he said, making an effort to speak naturally. "Tom has just told me he saw you, but I didn't believe him. Are you expected at Broadyards?"

"No," she replied in a quiet, even listless voice, nor did she even offer her hand in greeting; and he noticed that she looked very white and tired. "I suppose I can get a cab?"

"Will you honour me? I had to go up to Branksome this afternoon in a perfect deluge, so I have the victoria," said Brian eagerly.

"Oh, thank you. Well, if you don't mind, I shall be very glad. I have no luggage to speak of—only this."

She pointed to the small dress-case on the shoulder of the porter behind her, to whom Brian indicated the carriage, and took Helen's wraps from her. He was agitated at sight of her, agitated and profoundly surprised. Not so Helen. She stepped back to these familiar scenes after the upheaval of the last two months with the careless indifference of one who seems to feel nothing. Even Brian, so intimately connected with that painful period, had no power to move her. She bowed gravely in response to several salutations from people who recognised her,

but somehow Brian was glad to get her into the carriage, and to turn the horse's head from the town, and from the curious gaze of inquiring, interested eyes. She looked totally unlike herself—she seemed almost dazed. A hundred questions burned upon his lips, yet did they not dare frame one.

"Is your father quite well?" she asked, after they had driven about five minutes in utter silence, which, however, did not appear to embarrass her.

"Thank you, yes; he had a bad time in March, but has quite recovered. You had not written to Broadyards, surely? I saw Guy this morning, and he said nothing."

"No, I have not written. Why do you come over it again?" she asked, with a slight, cold smile. "Do you think they'll close the door on me? If so, I have money in my purse."

"God forbid!" said Brian, and his brow grew dark, not at the suggestion her words contained, but at the pitiful change trouble had wrought in this dear woman—trouble which had robbed her eye of its lustre, her cheek of its bloom, her heart of its lightness, its gentle, happy courage. She came back to the dale she had left in the flower of womanhood a beaten woman, old before her time.

Brian could have gnashed his teeth in the impotency of his wrath, his unavailing regret.

"Mrs. Douglas is at home and well," he said, uttering the commonplace as he best could. "We both know what a joy it will be to her to see you."

"Do we?" A slow, wondering smile parted her sad lips. "I do not feel so confident. We are all so very respectable in the Dale; we do not like people with histories, like me."

"You have not returned to your husband, then?" said Brian abruptly.

"I have not, else I would not be here."

"And no reconciliation is possible?" he questioned further.

"No reconciliation is possible," she repeated, without any alteration of face or voice. "Has my sister talked of me recently, Brian?"

The frank way in which she addressed him was a mark of confidence which sent a little glow to his honest heart.

"Not for some time. She told me you had written from Reutensee."

"And is everything known here?"

"Nothing; even my father knows nothing. Only Madam Douglas, besides Guy and Annie, is aware that you have been living apart from Woodgate for two months."

He thought it would be a relief to her to hear it, but it only provoked another slight, inexplicable smile.

"That is so like the Dale—so like my sister, I mean. I ought not to have come back. Is Madam at Teviothead just now?"

"Yes; she has not been away since her return from Mentone."

"And is she well?"

"Yes; younger than ever. She talks to me about you sometimes."

Helen turned her head away quickly, and he did not dream that her eyes were wet.

"I am glad Madam is at Teviothead," she said in a satisfied voice, and afterwards Brian had occasion to remember the words. "Annie was very desirous at one time that Madam should not know. Who told her?"

"I did, when I returned from London," replied Brian. "She was suffering from her old enemy, gout, and I was in attendance for about a fortnight. We had many talks, and I seemed to get to know her as I had never known her before. We did not use to think, Helen, there was a sweet side to Madam's nature."

"No; but I have seen it, when I was here at the beginning of the year. We are always misjudging people, and will, I suppose, till all our gigantic mistakes are made clear to us in a clearer light," Helen replied. "Did you see in London the people I asked you to see for me, Brian?"

"I did."

"Well?"

"I liked Mr. Hargreaves exceedingly, and I think he liked me. He is the sort of man to make a friend of; not an atom

of humbug or pretence anywhere—all sincerity and candour. I wish there were more like him."

"Yet he has some enemies—and bitter ones. Well, are you not going to say anything about the other, Brian?"

"I don't know what to say," he replied frankly.

"You admired her as a woman, of course?—her appearance, I mean; everyone must."

"I certainly thought her the most beautiful woman I had ever seen," he admitted; "and her manners are fascinating."

"Yes," said Helen, with a faint sigh, "I thought when you saw her you would probably take a different view of the case."

"If you mean your case, it made no difference," said Brian hotly; "I shall never take but one view of that. How any man who has won you could look at another, I cannot understand, and never will."

"Apart from her appearance, how did she strike you?" asked Helen, with interest. "I am curious to know."

"I thought her sincere, and there is no doubt of her regard for you. In fact, the whole thing mystified me, does mystify me yet, as nothing has ever done in this world."

"There are Broadyards gates already," said Helen suddenly. "I can get out here and leave the box at the lodge. There is no need to take you so much out of your way."

"I shall drive you up," replied Brian quickly. "Tom, go right to the house."

"Yes, sir."

The lodge-keeper ran out, and, seeing who sat beside Doctor Brian, was so paralysed she forgot her function.

"Oh, Miss Helen,—Mrs. Woodgate, I mean,—nobody expects you, do they?" she asked, all in a flutter.

"No, but I met a friend in need, Mrs. Scott. How are you all?"

"Very well, thanks; an' yersel'? Ye look but puirly, but what can folk expect in the like o' London? The maister's weel, I hope?"

"Thank you," said Helen; and, happily, at the moment Tom drove on.

In three minutes more they drew up at the pillared doorway of the old house. It was now half-past seven, and dinner was being served, Mrs. Douglas having at last obtained her heart's desire, a late dinner. The dining-room was to the front, but at the farther side of the door, so that, though they heard the wheels, they could not see the carriage.

Guy, however, got up, and, glancing out of the window, recognising Tom, did not look any farther.

"It's Brian. Bring Dr. Laidlaw right in, Shaw. He's been at Branksome, and his own dinner will be spoiled in the waiting. He may just as well have a bite with us."

Mrs. Douglas, looking very dainty and sweet in her mourning silk, with the delicate white crêpe at the throat which but enhanced the lovely whiteness of her skin, busied herself with the fowl she was so deftly carving, and said nothing. It was a very free-and-easy household, more like a country farmhouse than a mansion, the master being very offhand and uncere-monious in his hospitality, bringing all sorts and conditions to his table without regard sometimes to the conventionalities so dear to his wife's soul. She had him pretty well under control, but there were some points in which he was as obstinate as a mule, some of her wishes which he totally ignored; and he told her flatly, indeed, that so long as he had bite and sup in the house, he should make welcome to it whom he liked, and the little wife had been compelled to acquiesce. But she had sometimes been known to freeze impromptu guests with her over-politeness, when they were such as did not commend themselves to her fastidious taste. This was one of the bones of contention, indeed, between Broadyards and his pretty wife.

Presently, Shaw, the portly old butler, who had elected to remain with the young master rather than follow his old mistress to Teviothead, came bustling back, looking rather scared.

"The doctor's brought Mrs. Woodgate, sir," he said, not looking at his mistress as he spoke. "She came by the London train."

Helen walked straight in behind him, and Mrs. Douglas leaped to her feet, all flushed and excited in a moment.

"Why, Helen, is it really you? Why didn't you write? And—and are you quite alone?"

Even as she kissed Helen, she glanced over her shoulder through the open door.

"Yes; I'm alone. How are you, Guy?" Helen said quietly. "Don't look as if you'd seen a ghost."

"I can't help it, it's so unexpected; but I'm awfully glad to see you, Helen, upon my word I am—awfully glad!"

There was no doubt of his welcome, it was written in every lineament of his face. And Helen went from her sister to him, and kissed him of her own accord for the first time, and there was a tremulousness in the eyes which met his, which sent the honest fellow out of the room with his own lashes wet.

"I'll just see if Brian won't come in," he said shamefacedly, as he took himself off. Shaw had also discreetly retired, and the sisters were left alone.

"Why on earth didn't you write, so that we could meet you in a Christian manner?" asked Annie, a trifle petulantly, noting at the same time that Helen looked shabby and tired and old, and feeling intensely for her, though vexed, horribly vexed, that she should dare to look so. "Just fancy allowing Brian, or anybody, to pick you up at the station. What would people think? Did you see anybody at the station?"

"Yes; May Gilbert and her mother, and the Elliots," replied Helen listlessly. "But what did it matter, anyhow? How's Guy? I hope not in bed yet?"

"Yes, he goes at seven. You'd better come up, Helen, and get your things off. Where's your luggage?"

"I had only one box; Brian's groom carried it into the hall, I think. But don't leave your dinner, and Guy. Tell me where to go."

"Don't be absurd; the dinner can wait till you are ready to sit down too. As if I could sit down quietly and finish mine when you are in the house. What room would you like, Helen—the regular spare bedroom?"

"No; the one I had last winter, if you don't mind. I can see the church from it," said Helen, and her face was very

weary. She had come to her own people, it is true, but it was not home, and her sister's welcome had a smack of suspicion and inquiry in it which she most keenly felt.

Mrs. Douglas rang the bell, and Shaw came bustling back to the room.

"Lay a cover for Mrs. Woodgate, and take the fowls back to cook to keep hot," she said quickly; "and ask, first, whether Dr. Laidlaw will dine too. Come, Helen."

The sisters left the room, and Shaw opened his plate-box with a mournful and sympathetic headshake. Meanwhile, Guy was on the doorstep with Brian, far enough away from the carriage to be able to speak frankly.

"Now, Brian, what does this mean? The poor thing looks like a shadow of herself. Has she said anything to you?"

"Enough to let me know that no reconciliation is probable yet," Brian answered sadly, and the two men looked at each other for a moment in mournful silence.

"I say, Brian, what are women made of? You'd have thought, wouldn't you, that my wife's heart would have overflowed at sight of her sister in such a sorry plight?"

"You don't mean to say Mrs. Douglas received her coldly?" said Brian, with flushing cheek.

"By Jove, she did; and if I don't know what she means by it before I sleep to-night, I'm a Dutchman," said Broadyards, with unmistakable decision.

"Please, sir, my mistress bade me ask if Dr. Laidlaw would dine too?" said Shaw, appearing in the doorway.

"No, not to-night, thank you," said Brian hastily. "I must go at once; my father will think something has happened to me already. Good-night, Guy. I'll see you to-morrow, old chap."

"You will, for I'll need somebody to talk to. I've gotten the rest of my dinner looking at Helen's eyes. Heavens, Brian! to think of the misery the best of people have to endure in this world is enough to upset all a fellow's ideas of justice, human or divine."

Brian said nothing, but he thought so too.

CHAPTER XL

"They were two sisters of one race."

INNER was over; the laird smoking a meditative, but not very comforting pipe in the gunroom; Helen and her sister in the library, where, though it was May, a little fire crackled merrily and was not unwelcome, for Broadyards stood in fairly high latitudes, and often after a rain storm, even in summer, there was a sharpness in the air which made a fire welcome if not imperative.

"Now, Helen," said Mrs. Douglas, kneeling down on the hearthrug and giving the fire a quite unnecessary poke, and then energetically brushing up the ash she had scattered on the tiles, "I hope you are going to tell me everything. You can't say you have treated me very well, can you?"

"I didn't mean to treat you badly, Annie; you might at least believe that," Helen replied, leaning back in the huge divan easy chair, which made her slight, thin figure look very small-proportioned indeed.

"Oh, that's all very well," said Annie impatiently; "but it is facts we want to deal with, not intentions. How long have you been back from that outlandish place where Brian went to look for you?"

Helen perceived that she was in the grasp of the inquisition, and resigned herself to her fate. "I returned to London last Friday," she replied meekly.

"And where have you been staying in the interval?"

"With my friend Miss Ryder, of whom you have heard me speak."

"Oh! And where, may I ask, is your husband?"

"I believe he is at Margate," Helen replied, and her face began to redden.

There was at the moment absolutely not a spark of sympathy between the sisters, and both felt it. But Mrs. Douglas conceived that she had been shabbily used, and she deemed it her duty, for her family's sake, to be at the bottom of the whole unhappy business. Helen, however, was even less disposed to be communicative than before. She answered every question under protest. Yet she was in that sore, suffering mood when a word of genuine sympathy would have broken her silence and drawn everything from her, as witness her emotion when her brother-in-law welcomed her so kindly.

"At Margate," repeated Annie meditatively. "Then you did not see him?"

"No. I have not seen him since I left Brighton," Helen replied calmly.

"And why did you leave Brighton? I have never heard the story, of course, though Brian has told us something. Do you think it a right thing to have given Brian Laidlaw the confidence you deny to your own sister? It has hurt me very much, Helen."

Helen put out her hand and touched the plump, pink fingers resting on the arm of her chair, a caressing touch such as she might have bestowed on a child. As such, indeed, the one sister regarded the younger, and felt no desire to talk to her as one woman can talk to another of the deep things of life. She was absolutely inexperienced, and in her ignorance of life arrogant in the extreme. Helen felt more and more that between them there was a great gulf fixed, though the tie of kinship still made a dearer bond than common between them.

"I did not give Brian a spontaneous confidence, Annie; simply answered his questions as I answer yours. Nobody seems to understand that I want to hold my tongue and to be let alone."

It was a passionate, heart-wrung cry, but Mrs. Douglas steeled herself against it; strong in her righteous belief that Helen owed a duty to her and to the family, and that her reticence was wrong as well as selfish in the extreme.

"Helen, dear," she began in a gentler voice, "I don't want to seem unkind, but you must not be so selfish. There is a duty one owes to one's family. We have heard one side of the story, and until we hear the other, from your lips, how are we to know how to act? That you have come back to us tells us you do not wish this estrangement to continue. I am very sorry for you, but I cannot go on any longer in the dark, and I won't. I owe it to myself, and to my husband; but especially to him."

"Guy is not like that, Annie. He is a true, dear fellow, and he would not harrow up my soul as you are doing now, not for the world."

"You know nothing about him, my dear," replied Annie calmly. "Men are all alike; they relegate every disagreeable duty to their wives. Guy is just as anxious to be at the bottom of it as I am. Of course, he feels the humiliation of the thing even more keenly than I."

This was a cruel thrust, which caused Helen's pale lips to compress themselves rather tightly.

"I will answer such questions as you may put to me, Annie, as I best know how, if I am able to endure them," she said at length.

"Really, Helen, you are very trying. I don't want you to go minutely into everything," she said, though that was exactly what she did want. "I only wish to know what Richard did that you felt justified in taking such a disastrous step. Surely that is not much to ask."

"Perhaps not. Well, since you have asked and I must answer, here it is. When I returned from being here last spring, we went to Brighton, as you know; and a mutual friend, a lady, went with us"—

"What was her name?" queried Annie, with keen interest, scenting a sensation.

"I would rather not say," replied Helen, quite coldly.

"Accidentally, one afternoon, I overheard a conversation between them, in which Richard frankly confessed to her that our marriage had been a gigantic mistake—in fact, that he had married me out of gratitude, because of the kindness he had received from us—that"—

"What impertinence!" cried Mrs. Douglas indignantly. "But go on."

"And that he never could be happy or satisfied with me. After that, perhaps, you will admit that it was time for me to take my departure."

"It certainly was abominable to hear that; but, pray, what sort of a woman was this that Richard spoke so confidentially to?—she couldn't be a very respectable person."

"We have nothing to do with her. She was and is my friend, Annie, and I prefer not to speak of her. That is the whole case. Are you satisfied now?"

"Well, things look a little clearer, but I don't understand it yet. Had you had no quarrel with Richard?—for, of course, men often say things when they are angry which they do not mean, and which no power on earth will make them admit they have said afterwards. Now, had I been you, I should have walked straight in on them, and asked Richard what on earth he meant by such audacity, and this unhappy breach might have been prevented."

"Yes; but that is just the difference between you and me, Annie. I could not do it."

"And you were quite friendly with him at the time?"

"We were not in the habit of quarrelling," replied Helen wearily, for this cross-questioning rent her very soul.

"It was certainly abominable to hear such a thing, and transcendental impudence of him to say it; when everybody knows you were oceans too good for him, and when nobody wanted you to marry him. Still, you might have had it out with him and gone on. I hope you think that you have punished him enough, and that you will go back to him now."

Helen never spoke. It was a remark it was altogether impossible for her to answer.

"Did you write to him, then, and tell him you had overheard?"

"I did not."

"And does he understand it to this day?"

"I suppose he does."

"Have you had no communication with him at all, then?"

"Yes; he wrote to me at Reutensee, and I replied to his letter."

"Did he apologise?"

Helen smiled—a wintry, mirthless smile—at the awful absurdity of the question.

"He did. He asked me to return, and I refused. I have no more to say to you, Annie, so pray don't ask me any more questions."

"Well, I won't if I can help it; but there are some things I must say yet, Helen. I would not be doing my duty as a Christian woman if I didn't say them. Now, do you think you are displaying a Christian spirit through this affair?"

"I have not thought about it," replied Helen, with a fine indifference.

"I suppose not. Of course you are fearfully unhappy; anybody can see that. You look as if you'd die of pure weariness at this minute, and for the time being you can't see beyond your own misery. You think me very hard-hearted, Helen, I know—I see it quite plainly in your eyes; but you are my only sister, and I love you too dearly to let you ruin your life without a word of protest. I am on the outside, and I can judge better than you. Won't you believe me when I say you have punished Richard enough, and that, seeing he has written entreating you to come back, won't you go back?"

She was very much in earnest. She leaned both her elbows on her sister's knees and looked at her imploringly, but Helen's expression never changed.

"I believe you mean everything for the best, Annie, but you are in no position to judge. In my present state of mind I would sooner jump into the Teviot than do what you say. The one step wouldn't be more fatal to me than the other."

"Yet you used to be so good, such an example to everybody," said Annie, looking very vexed. "The Bible tells us to forgive our enemies, and I am sure dear papa was always preaching charity. I wish he were here to advise you."

"Oh, my God, so do I!" cried Helen, with a passion so terrible that Annie started back looking genuinely scared.

"Dear me, Helen! don't use such language. You are quite, quite changed from what you used to be, and I am sure it would have broken poor papa's heart had he lived to see it. Well, since you are quite determined in your own way, what are you going to do?" Helen shook her head in the same listless, indifferent way. "Of course, we are very glad to have you here, but I should like to hear what you are going to do with yourself."

"Couldn't you let me rest—even one night, Annie?" asked Helen. "One thing I promise you, I shall not stay too long at Broadyards."

"Don't be absurd. Of course you can stay just as long as you like at Broadyards. What I want to know is what you propose to do ultimately."

"I will tell you as soon as I know myself."

"Nobody knows in the Dale that you and Richard are not quite happy, except Brian and Madam. I was very angry with Brian for telling Madam, and I think he has been too officious all through. But he means well, and there is no doubt about his devotion to you. But, of course, Helen, if you stay here a long time, and nothing is ever heard or seen of Richard, what will people say? and what more dreadful than to find oneself or one's relations the gossip of the countryside?"

"I shall leave in time to prevent that contingency, Annie, never fear," said Helen, with a faintly ironical smile.

"Then you are quite determined not to give Richard a chance to explain or make it up?" said Annie, with her tiny slippered foot beating a slightly impatient tattoo on the brass fender. "You would not allow me to write and ask him down, I suppose? an interview is always so much better than writing. He certainly behaved very rudely to me when I saw

him in London ; but Guy saw him again next day, and he was quite different, and I should say by now he must be in a very penitent frame of mind."

Helen was made aware for the first time that an interview had taken place, but she felt too dispirited to inquire any particulars.

"If I thought you would do that, Annie, I should leave Broadyards in the morning. I have been very patient, dear, because I believe you have my interest at heart, but can't you see that this is a matter between my husband and me alone? It is impossible for anyone else to judge or to say what we should or should not do, and I must decline to discuss it any further."

Helen spoke gently, but with a decision there was no mistaking.

"Very well ; I shall say no more, but, of course, it is very awkward for us, in our position here, to have awkward questions put."

"Nobody ever asks me questions except you," said Helen calmly. "If they question you again, refer them to me."

"Well, to change the subject, is that all—the luggage you have? Where are all your things?"

"In the house at Hampstead."

Annie nodded.

"And there they are to remain, I suppose. I have never seen you so shabby. Such a lovely house, too. I had no idea it was so large and fine ; and to leave it all—oh, I have no patience with you!"

Helen got up all of a sudden.

"May I go upstairs and look at Guy, Annie? If we talk here any longer, we shall certainly say things we should regret."

Her sister made no reply, and Helen left the room. Mrs. Douglas continued her ruminations in silence, and by the pucker in her brows showed that she was seriously disturbed.

The laird, still wondering what was transpiring in the library, had lit a third pipe and was trying to read a little, when his wife came in and plumped herself down on a basket chair.

"Oh, Guy, I have just been talking very seriously to Helen, and I'm out of all patience with her. I don't believe they'll ever be reconciled if she goes on like that; and just think what people will say."

"Oh, hang people!"

The laird threw his pipe on the floor and sat round with more energy than his wife had seen him display for a long time.

"Now look here, Annie; I've got something to say to you, and I mean it. Helen has come to us in trouble, and she best knows how deep it is, and what is her mind regarding it. What we've got to do is to be kind to her; and if you think you gave her a good welcome to-night, I didn't. It made me so ashamed I could have cried."

Mrs. Douglas stared. This was capping the climax, and it made her altogether speechless.

"You're a great deal too frightened for what people will say. What the dickens business is it of anybody's whether Woodgate and Helen pull together or not? It isn't even any business of ours. They aren't babies, to be whipped and put to bed if they don't do as we want them. Depend upon it, if Helen left Woodgate, she did it with her eyes open, and knew what she did it for. She'll go back to him when she thinks fit, and we've got no earthly business to meddle with it. All we've got to do is to be kind to her, as I said, and try to make things easy for her. I won't have Helen bullied here, Annie, remember that."

Thus did Broadyards deliver himself of the conviction of his honest, tender soul; and under the torrent of his homely eloquence his astonished wife sat absolutely dumb.

CHAPTER XLI

"Human hearts are harps divinely strung,
Waiting the power of kindred soul."

BRIAN was very busy. The fitful winds and treacherous sun-blinks of May told upon children and old people in the Dale and on the hills, and the popular doctor did not eat the bread of idleness. He had talked of getting an assistant for a long time, but what is the good of an assistant, as his father pointed out, whom nobody will see? Not that Brian grumbled. He loved his work, and there was not a lazy bone in him. He was never happier than starting out of a morning with a list of visits in his pocket so long that he did not know how to overtake them in a day. The old man was a trifle frailer, but could still relieve his son a little in the surgery at the house, and very proud he was when he had seen two or three patients there, which he called a good day's work.

The morning after Helen's arrival, though his visiting list was not shorter than usual, Brian deliberately made a perfectly unnecessary detour, in fact, went to pay a visit entirely out of his way. About twelve o'clock his trap was driven through the gate at Teviothead, which surprised the lodge-keeper, Madam now being out of the Doctor's hands. Teviothead, the dower house of the Douglasses, was less imposing, of course, than Broadyards, but was a very homely and picturesque

house, standing, as its name indicated, at the foot of the hill from which arose the river that watered the Dale, and which flowed through the grounds—a tiny limpid stream, gathering supplies from many burns as it rippled on its way. There was no pollution in the Teviot at its source, and many a lusty trout had Brian brought to bank from the dusky pools within the demesne of Teviothead. Like most healthy-minded, healthy-bodied dalesmen, he was a keen sportsman; but a popular doctor in a wide and scattered district has but little time for recreation.

The long avenue to the house skirted the river for some little distance, and as Brian watched the sunbeams rippling in the shallows, and the little eddies made by the trout, the soul of the angler was stirred in him.

“I say, Tom, a good basket could be made here, early as it is. We’ll come up some evening after dinner and have a try at it.”

Tom grinned appreciatively. He adored his master, who treated him with a friendly familiarity, which, however, never encouraged the slightest presuming, and the relations between them were of the happiest, most ideal kind. Madam kept early hours at Teviothead, breakfasting every morning at eight and lunching at noon; and the whole mechanism of the establishment moved on wheels, the vibration of which was never felt. She was in the dining-room, and caught sight of the doctor’s gig as it came whirling round the sweep of the avenue before the door.

“There’s the doctor, Katie. Bring another plate, and he’ll have some soup, honest man. He has aye a long round, and question when he’ll get another meal of meat.”

Madam had no men-servants in the house, having relinquished them with the other accessories of her greater estate at Broad-yards. But she had clever and capable women about her—dainty in their ways as she was herself.

Though quite alone, and in somewhat failed health, she never abated a jot of her extreme precision and daintiness of attire. At twelve o’clock in the day she wore her black silk gown, her beautiful lace cap and fichu, and the chatelaine

which nobody ever saw her without. And she was very handsome and stately, like an old portrait stepped from its frame into life.

"Blithe am I to see you, Brian," she said, meeting him heartily at the dining-room door. "But I didna send for you," she added, with a twinkle in her eye. "I'm no' one that'll hae a doctor for ever at my tail, unless need be."

"Oh, I won't charge you this visit, Madam. It isn't professional; though I suppose I may ask how you are, now I have come."

"Oh, I'm fine. Do you see anything by ordinary about me? Katie, see that the doctor's groom has some kale, and you needna come in or I ring."

Katie withdrew, and Brian threw his riding-gloves on Madam's shiny damask, and laid his hat above them.

"Mrs. Woodgate has come to Broadyards, Madam. She came last night."

"Eh, no! and is the man wi' her?"

"Oh no; there seems to be no settlement so far as that is concerned."

"Dear me!" Madam began to tremble. The thing touched her nearly, for Helen was dear to her as if she had been her own daughter. "Dear me! Mrs. Guy never let on to me on Sabbath at the kirk that she was expected."

"Nor was she. I was at Branksome yesterday afternoon, and happened to drive by the station as the London train came in. I sent Tom up for a parcel, and he brought back word that Mrs. Woodgate was on the platform. And she was there, sure enough. I drove her up to Broadyards."

"And how does she look, dear lamb? Tell me a'thing, Brian. It was kind of you to come."

"I am afraid I had a selfish reason, and I don't know that I have any business to state it. But, upon my word, I can't help it, Madam. This thing has cut me up so awfully. Helen did not appear to be very sure about her welcome at Broadyards; and after she went in, Guy came out and told me Mrs. Douglas had received her but coldly."

Madam's delicate face flushed, and her sweet, strong mouth took its sternest line.

"She's a silly thing—a silly, empty thing, that canna see ower her own doorstane," she said, with a passion most unusual. "And she thinks a deal more o' what folk will say about it than of the trouble it is to Helen. But tell me about Helen, Brian; how does she look?"

"But poorly; not nearly so well as when I saw her at Reutensee. She looks just as a woman might be expected to look who has come through dire trouble—worn out."

One bright tear started in Madam's eye and rolled down the pink of her cheek.

"It's a sore thing, Brian; a sore, sore thing, and I wish we understood it better than we do. But of this I am assured, Helen Lockhart is not one to lichtlie a marriage vow for naught. Nor has she ta'en this step, as a silly lassie might, for spite or pure waywardness."

"Perhaps not; but there is a danger in a nature like hers, Madam, which I think you will admit; there is too much indwelling on self, until a certain degree of morbidness is bound to arise. If anybody can get at the bottom of it, and put it on the best possible basis, it is you, Madam, because you are sympathetic as well as strong. I wish you'd try."

Madam turned away and busied herself at the table for a moment in silence.

"Here, eat this soup, Brian, while I think what is to be done. Do you think I should go over to Broadyards?"

"Not to-day; perhaps you had better wait till they send word. I really had no business to carry the news to you, Madam, but I just couldn't help it."

"Oh, there's nothing wrong in that, Brian, though Mrs. Guy is queer. I was to go to lunch on Wednesday—that's the morn. I'll bide till then, unless they send me a message to-day; an' they needna ken who told me, Brian. I dinna doubt it's the clash o' the Dale by now."

"That will do very well," said Brian in a well-pleased voice.

"And if there be na room for Helen in Broadyards, big

though it be, there's room here, Brian ; an' blithe would I be to see her."

"It would do her more good than anything. If I had to prescribe for her, Madam, I'd advise a higher latitude, and say Broadyards lies too low on the river."

"Doctors' lees," said Madam, with a smile. "So there's no betterment? Did Helen speak at all about her man to you?"

"She said no reconciliation was possible meanwhile, that was all."

"Ah, weel, we canna meddle too much wi' married folk ; it's but a thankless job. But if she doesna go back to him, what's to become o' her? tell me that. She's no' one o' the wild women that cry for emancipation an' a' that. Hame is Helen's bit, an' aye was. Bereft o' that, what think ye is left to the bairn? Why, just naething at a', an' she'll dwine awa' like a rose that has a worm at its heart, an' withers in its bloom."

"You never said a truer word than that, Madam," said Brian, as he rose to his feet. "If you should get Helen's confidence, try and make it up between them. It is the only way ; and she loved him dearly once, whatever she may feel for him now."

"I'll see what I can do. How's your father, honest man? I saw him in the kirk on Sabbath ; his face minds one on nothing but a psalm of praise. What a gran' auld age has the man that is mindfu' o' his Maker ! There's nae regrets in yon face, Brian ; it's like the sky when the hairst moon is up, after a long working day."

"I'll tell him what you say, Madam. Sometimes he says he is but a cumberer of the ground."

"That's when he's eaten too much. Tell him from me, then, that he preaches a sermon to me ilka Sabbath day, that does me mair guid than anything I have heard in the kirk o' Broadrule since our minister gaed awa'," she said, nodding all the way out to the doorsteps, where she bade him good-bye, but stood still to watch the fine young fellow vault into the gig ; and in her old heart there arose many vain regrets.

So moved was she by Brian's news that she was very fain to

order her own carriage to Broadyards at once, but she put the curb on her impatience. She was rewarded about four o'clock in the afternoon by the vision of her own son on horseback coming up the avenue; a welcome sight at all times, but especially to-day, when she was so full of anxiety to hear all about Helen.

"I saw Brian, mother, and he told me he had been here," was his greeting. "This is a bad business about Helen. When are you coming over to see her?"

"I was coming the morn."

"You'd better come the night, I think. Things are not as they should be between her and Annie, and I've even had words with my wife about it."

"But can I do any good, Guy, my man? That's what I want to ken."

"Yes; it's mothering Helen wants, not badgering. No man ever had a better wife than I've got, mother, but she's put up her back at her own sister in a way I cannot understand, and I'm not fit to bide it. Women are very queer creatures. I can't make them out."

"Well, it's but four o'clock. I can come and go before the darkenin', and I'll bring Helen back wi' me if she'll come."

"Oh, she'll come fast enough; but I question if Annie'll let her. But the chance is this, mother; Annie has to be at Mrs. Gilbert's at some drawing-room meeting at six to-night. Suppose you just take her away without letting on."

The old lady silently laughed, rather enjoying the idea of stealing a march on her daughter-in-law, especially if aided and abetted therein by her son.

"Well, I'll come, and we'll see. Katie Forbes, bid John get out the brougham as quick as he can, to take me to Broadyards. Here's a cup of tea, Guy, while he gets ready."

They talked of Helen as they ate and drank, but Guy could not tell any more than Brian, hardly as much. It was about half-past five when they reached Broadyards, and the pony-carriage was at the door to drive the young mistress to Traquair. She came downstairs buttoning her gloves, and when she saw

the Teviothead carriage, bit her lips in vexation, though Guy had told her he had gone up to see his mother, and tell her Helen had come. Young Mrs. Douglas had been rather subdued all day after her husband's unwonted sharp speaking, but the atmosphere had not been very sunshiny, and Helen had occupied herself the whole day with little Guy out in the grounds. When Annie saw the carriage, she ran half-way upstairs again, and called to her sister—

"Helen, Helen, come down! Here's Madam come to see you." Then she went out in a very dignified manner to greet her mother-in-law.

"How do you do, Granny? Didn't Guy tell you I was trysted to Mrs. Gilbert's at six o'clock? I'm sure he need not have forgotten so soon."

"Oh, he told me, my dear,—but it's Helen I've come to see. Where is she?"

"Upstairs; but I've told her. There she is on the landing, but not very blithe company for anybody, Granny; more's the pity."

Madam alighted quickly from her carriage and stepped within the house; and when Helen saw her, she gave a strange cry, and the stony calm of her face broke, and a great trembling shook her. Ay, it was mothering she needed, as Guy had said; and when Annie saw how she crept into Madam's arms, and the expression on Madam's face when she so enfolded her, she got very quietly and soberly into the phaeton and drove away, feeling that there were a great many things, clever as she was, she did not understand. And when she returned to find that Madam had taken Helen away, she did not seem surprised, and never said a word. Also, she was more gentle of speech and manner to her husband than she had been all day.

CHAPTER XLII

“O vanished hope, that withered in its bloom !”

AT Teviothead Helen seemed at peace. There was a restfulness in the house, a dignity and repose indescribably soothing to a troubled spirit. Nobody was ever in a hurry, everything moved in its placid, undisturbed way, and, above all, nobody asked any questions. Helen was so sick of being questioned that she felt profoundly grateful to find herself in an atmosphere not interrogatory. Madam had the wisdom of experience, the tact of a fine and delicate nature ; she saw that what Helen wanted most of all was absolute rest, physical and mental. It was quite evident that the body was not less weary than the soul. Watching her closely with the solicitude of love, Madam observed certain signs which disturbed her not a little. Helen's appetite was fitful and capricious, and she was easily tired, neither did she sleep well. Madam often heard her moving in her room in the silent watches ; and the old lady would herself lie awake till morning, pondering what was to be done. That this sort of thing should go on was, of course, impossible. But it was not easy to break down the wall of Helen's absolute reserve. She was painfully sensitive too, and would scarcely go without the grounds of Teviothead. When Madam insisted that she should go for a drive, she had to choose those bye-roads where they were not likely to encounter anybody. And so a week passed away. One afternoon

Madam had gone to Hallkirk, and Helen was alone in the house.

Katie Forbes, who thought many things and said nothing, and was therefore a treasure in the house, had brought tea to her in the drawing-room, and was waiting upon her in her gentle, kindly, unobtrusive fashion, when a visitor arrived at the house in the shape of Mrs. Gilbert of Traquair, and she asked for Mrs. Woodgate. The door was opened by the under housemaid, who, thinking nothing, immediately showed the lady into the drawing-room. Katie Forbes reddened at sight of her, and blamed herself for not being on the alert to hear the knocker, but could do nothing but retire at once. And what could Helen do, having known Mrs. Gilbert nearly all her days, but get up and try to receive her with a perfect nonchalance? But it was a great effort, which made her greeting constrained even to coldness.

"Madam is not at home, Mrs. Gilbert," she said, a little confusedly, for the keen eyes of the visitor were upon her face, taking in every detail.

"Oh, never mind. I was driving on the Broadrule road, and I saw the Teviothead carriage go by, and when I saw Madam in it alone, I just said to myself, 'I'll go up and have a little talk with Mrs. Woodgate for old times' sake,' and here I am."

She said all this with the utmost complacency, and sat down opposite to Helen, her silk skirts making a great rustling, and her whole appearance suggestive of inward satisfaction.

She was the wife of one of the Hallkirk manufacturers, a well-meaning, kindly-disposed body, but eaten up with an unwholesome curiosity regarding her neighbours and their affairs. She was not a lady, but there was nothing offensively vulgar about her, except when she wanted to be at the bottom of some Dale gossip; and that was her mood and intention to-day. The Gilberts lived in great style in the old mansion house of Traquair, on the left bank of the Teviot, one of the seats of an impoverished Border family, and were potentates in the Dale. There was a very nice family of sons and daughters,

with whom the Manse girls had been intimate in the old days. But Mrs. Gilbert, with her insatiable prying into private matters, had been ever the *bête noir* of the minister of Broadrule, the only woman who ever tempted him to forget his usual courtesy.

"Mrs. Guy was at our house the other night at the Zenana meeting, and she was very short with me when I asked after you," said Mrs. Gilbert, with an aggrieved note in her voice. "And she never said you had gone up to Teviothead. Do you know if I have done anything to offend Mrs. Douglas, Helen? The girls and I have been puzzling over it all the week."

"I am sure you haven't, Mrs. Gilbert," Helen replied quickly. "How are you all at Traquair? Florence will be quite a big girl now."

"Not so very big; it is not two years yet since you left the Dale, Mrs. Woodgate. And how is your husband, and when do you expect him down?"

"I don't know."

Helen was no match for the gossip-monger. She could refuse to answer questions, but she could not parry them.

"You don't know? How odd! Well, I suppose he is very busy. And are you going to make a stay for some time?"

"Yes, I think so—that is, I don't know. Oh, thank you, Katie! just stay here and wait," she said, turning with evident relief as Katie Forbes came in with a cup for Mrs. Gilbert. She knew very well that so long as the servant remained in the room, Mrs. Gilbert could not come to very close quarters; and I think Katie understood, for she remained till the last possible moment, until there was no shadow of excuse for her to linger any longer. Then she took away the tray, and Mrs. Gilbert returned to the attack. She called her curiosity a kindly interest in the girl she had known so long, and had no qualms of conscience, though she might have been warned by a certain look in Helen's eyes—the look of a hunted animal at bay. So she blundered on.

"You don't look very well. I am sorry. Quite changed from what you were in the old days. Mary thought so too

that day we saw you at the station. I suppose it's the fogs in London. How do you like it on the whole?"

Helen was in absolute torture, and did not know what to say. She therefore said nothing at all; and Mrs. Gilbert kept looking at her, drawing her own conclusions from the fitful colour wavering in her cheek and the general nervousness of her demeanour.

"I daresay it'll do you ever so much good to be in the Dale, though why you should prefer Teviothead to Broadyards I can't think. Helen, excuse me, but I'm a very old friend. I knew your mother before you were born, and, of course, I'm interested in you. Is there anything wrong? Of course there are all sorts of stories going. Do tell me, so that I may be able to put my foot down."

"What kind of stories, Mrs. Gilbert?" asked Helen calmly, though her colour came and went more fitfully than before. "Pray tell me what they are saying."

"Well, my dear, it is not pleasant for me to repeat what is being said," replied Mrs. Gilbert. "But it is certainly believed that you are not altogether happy with Mr. Woodgate, and some even go to the length of saying that you are separated from him. I hope you will give me authority to contradict it."

"It is quite true," replied Helen. "So you may allow them to talk."

Mrs. Gilbert looked petrified, and sat for a full minute quite silent. Then she leaned forward eagerly, and with an expression of genuine concern in her face. She was certainly kind-hearted, and sincerely deplored the calamity she had not believed.

"Oh, my dear, this is very dreadful! What was it all about? You know none of us approved your marriage with Mr. Woodgate, though we never expected it would come to this."

Helen never spoke.

"Surely you don't mean that it is a separation for life?" said Mrs. Gilbert mercilessly. "Mr. Woodgate was never much of a favourite in the Dale, but we never thought he was a bad man."

"He is not a bad man," said Helen in a very low, clear voice; and she rose as she spoke. "I wish you would go

away, Mrs. Gilbert. You have no right to question me as you have done ; and now you have learned what you came to learn, perhaps you will be so kind as to go away."

Mrs. Gilbert was not a particularly sensitive person, but it was impossible to ignore such a request. She had no alternative but to rise also.

"Well, I'm sure, I didn't mean any harm, Mrs. Woodgate ; and I'm your true friend, whether you believe it or not," she said forcibly. "If I have given offence, I'm sure I'm heartily sorry ; but you might believe it wasn't meant."

"I have taken no offence," said Helen drearily, "and I believe you feel kindly towards me ; but there are some things one can't discuss, even with friends."

"I won't speak of it, I do assure you, Helen," said the good woman, secretly touched and anxious to atone for the hurt she had too evidently inflicted. "And perhaps it'll all come right. I'm sure, from the bottom of my heart I pray it will ; so keep your heart up, my dear, and good-bye."

Her going was more graceful than her coming, and she kept her word, lover of gossip though she was ; she did not even mention to her own husband that she had been at Teviothead, nor a word of what had passed. And, more, she took it upon herself to reprove several who seemed inclined to spread the report about the separation of the Woodgates, and so did something towards allaying the tide of gossip rolling through the Dale. The intensity of Helen's look, the extreme bitterness of her words, had left an indelible impression on the woman's soul ; and she truly felt that such a sorrow was too sacred to be bandied from mouth to mouth like other minor affairs that occupy the busybodies of a countryside.

It was six o'clock when Madam returned to Teviothead, and when Katie Forbes told her Mrs. Gilbert had been there, great was her wrath. She knew the woman well, and feared the consequences.

"Well, my dear ; you've had company, Katie tells me. And what did my lady Gilbert want here ? News, I suppose ; is that it, dearie ?"

"She got what she wanted, Madam," replied Helen, with a faint smile. "And I fear I was not so civil as I ought to have been to a guest in Teviothead."

"A guest in Teviothead, indeed!" said Madam in lofty scorn. "She's nae guest o' mine, certy. I only wish I'd been here, not a foot would the woman have set up this stair. She has vexed ye sair, my lamb; but never you mind; her clash is but the sough o' the wind over a dry stane dyke, and leaves nae mark behind; never heed her."

"She made me think, though, Madam," said Helen, looking out of the window with a far-off expression. "I cannot stay here for ever, and what am I to do? Can't you tell me what I am to do?"

Madam gulped down a lump in her throat, and threw back her bonnet-strings.

"Helen, I hae never said man till ye since ye came, an' wadna hadna ye spoken. It's but little I ken; maybe some day, when ye are able, ye'll tell me the story, and then we'll tak' counsel thegither. Ye are young an' I am auld, an' auld een whiles see clearer than the young, and get blinks o' licht through the clouds that mak' the way plain. D'ye understand me, my lamb?"

Helen slid to her knees at the old lady's feet and laid her head in her lap. She was very weary, and the strength in that sweet kindly face was good for her. And bit by bit, with her face so hidden, the story came out, the sad history of disillusionment, of heartache, of bitter striving with influences that bound her soul to earth. Nothing was hid. For the first time, Helen Woodgate laid bare her soul to another, emptying its secret recesses, laying her load at the feet of a loving, motherly woman, whose face grew grave and grey and solemn with the vast tender pity of her soul. She saw in that pitiful revealing what was sadder to her than all the mere shattering of a girlish ideal, the gradual undermining of a faith in human goodness and in the justice of Eternal Heaven. The anguish of human loss had weakened her faith and driven her from the Divine. Thinking of the dark ways that tortured soul had groped alone, Madam's

heart grew dark within her, and she uplifted it in passionate prayer, which, when Helen ceased, found a voice.

"Helen, my bairn, this is beyond all human aid," she said in a voice vibrating with tenderness. "Listen while I spier for other help. David cried to the Lord from the depths, and He heard him. Shall He be less merciful to poor, lone, and stricken women this day?"

And she prayed with an awful and solemn earnestness, which fell upon Helen's rent soul, long estranged from communion with Heaven, like some singular and precious balm.

"We will speak nae mair this nicht, my dear lamb. We hae cast the burden on the Lord, now we wait patiently for Him."

She passed her arm round Helen and raised her from her knees, looking into her face with those eyes made tender by a mother's love. And she was struck by the sharp, thin outline of Helen's face, and a strange, sad fear went chilly to her heart. She said never a word of it to Helen that day, however, though on the next she did not forbear to question. And the next time she met Brian, she looked at him with an awful pathos in her eyes.

"Brian," she said, and her voice shook, "maybe I do wrong to tell ye, but tell somebody I must, and ye are a doctor as well as a trusty friend. There's something far amiss wi' Helen. Can ye guess what?"

Brian shook his head.

"Does she look worse than usual? and what in Heaven's name is to be the end of it, Madam? Can nothing on earth be done to bring the two together again?"

"We can dae naething," she said, and her tears fell. "But the Lord has His ain ways of workin', an' He has lifted the thing clean out of our hands, yours or mine, or anybody's."

"How?" inquired Brian, mystified and even awed by her words.

"Ye havena guessed, then? Stoop down an' I'll whisper ye, my lad. In six months' time Helen will hae a bairn at her breast, an' if that dinna mak' peace, then peace is not to be made atween the two this side the grave."

CHAPTER XLIII

"The sorrows of the soul are graver still!"

NOW a curious experience came to Woodgate, curious and novel. Having wound up all his affairs, dismantled the Manor House, and given up all that was necessary to satisfy the call of the liquidators, he found himself practically penniless, and obliged to take immediate steps to earn his daily bread. Though the rooms in Norfolk Street were modest and inexpensive, they were beyond his means, unless he could at once devise some method of procuring money. He was assured by Hargreaves and others that anything he might write would find an immediate and profitable market, and indeed he had no doubt on that point; but when he set himself down with the stern resolve to write what should give him the equivalent for bread, then this new and bitter experience was his. For he found thought only a confused jumble and chaos, in which there did not loom one available idea. He had now the desire and the will to work, but power seemed to have departed from him. And yet the task he essayed at first was of the most elementary, the first of a series of travel papers he had promised to one of the new magazines. He did not fail to cover the sheet with writing, but it was such poor inconsequent stuff, empty of originality and brilliance, that he tore it up in ineffable disgust; and, throwing himself back in his chair, he tried to

face the situation. The room in which he sat was directly above Hargreaves', and corresponded with it in size. But it was a less homely place, and savoured so entirely of the mere lodging-house, that Woodgate often looked round him with a little shiver of disgust. The floor was the principal eyesore, with its square of cheap, gaudy tapestry carpet, and its surround of harsh, yellowish paint, which the enterprising Mrs. Figges regarded as a special artistic triumph. Four painted chairs in American cloth, and a very short bony couch of the same; a square table with stained legs and a deal top, covered by a yellow and crimson tapestry cloth, completed the furnishings. The decorations consisted of two jingling glass ornaments, a gilt chimney-glass, and a wooden American clock with a design of impossible roses painted on the lower part of it; an oleograph representing a pair of intense lovers parting in a perfect bower of greenery hung above the couch, and was also much admired by Mrs. Figges. Woodgate more than once had been on the point of shying his ink-pot or an open pen-knife at this inoffensive production, but was restrained by the certainty that he should have to make the damage good. He was by nature fastidious, fond of artistic and harmonious surroundings, to which he had been all his life accustomed; therefore the change was great. He had but one compensation, the peep of the Embankment and the river he could obtain from the window by placing his chair in a certain angle; and there he sat oftenest and longest, with his pad and his ink-pot on his knee, looking out dreamily, blankly, and finding himself destitute of any capacity for work. Hargreaves had been obliged in self-defence to lock his door in working hours, and to take no notice of sundry appeals for admittance.

"I've got to live, Dick, if you haven't, so you may spare your knuckles," he said one morning about eleven o'clock, when Woodgate, after a vain attempt to concentrate his thoughts, came thundering at the door.

"Let me in just half a minute, old chap. I'm going out. 'Pon my word, I won't even sit down."

Hargreaves, with rather an impatient jerk, turned the key,

and then went back to his desk, keeping his back resolutely turned towards the door.

"I say, Harry, what on earth do you suppose I'm going to do?" he inquired, so dolefully that Hargreaves was smitten, and turned a more than usually sympathetic face to his friend.

"If you'd stop in the place and make yourself work, instead of wandering about like an evil spirit," he began severely; but Woodgate's particularly disconsolate look struck him, and his lips parted in a half-satirical, half-compassionate smile.

The change in the man was so great as to amaze him. The confident air of self-assurance which, mingled with a cynical, condescending amiableness, had made him so objectionable, had entirely disappeared, and he was absolutely natural, perhaps for the first time in his life. There was a humility in his very attitude, as he leaned against the closed door with his hands in his pockets, which inwardly touched Hargreaves, though he did not suffer it to appear.

"It's all very well for you to say stop in the place, but I believe it's the place that's at the bottom of it. I've traced that awful pattern on the floor ten distinct and separate times since breakfast, and regarded those maddening idiots in that picture till I had to retire before murder was done. Seriously, Dick, it's madness to try it. If I ever write again, it will be in different circumstances. Meanwhile, I'd better go out, and see if any kind Christian will give me a job."

"What kind of a job?"

"Oh, anything. I'll try Blake, of the East India Company. You've seen him at our place. There's surely something in that huge place a fellow of fair ability, mental and physical, might be fit for. I might pack tea, if nothing else was available."

"Where's the place?"

"King William Street. I'll go down now. Heavens, Harry! I'm in a queer predicament."

"It's all part of the programme," replied Hargreaves serenely.

"Well, I'll be free after two, and if you like, we'll take train to

Hampton, and have a pull as far as Teddington. I can take out Waldron's punt when I like. Couldn't you meet me at Waterloo at half-past two?"

"All right. If I'm not back here by then, I'll be at Waterloo," said Woodgate, taking his hands from his pockets and giving himself a prodigious stretch. "I say, Harry," he added before he went, "it's her—Helen. She comes between me and everything. If I could forget her, I could do anything."

Then he flung himself out of the room and banged the door. Out of doors he forgot or postponed his errand to the City. He sauntered down to the Embankment, and, keeping close by the parapet, sauntered along aimlessly, regarding the swift flow of the incoming tide with eyes in which there was a strange wistfulness. That swift tide had hidden many sorrows, tenderly covered up many failures. Why not his? The thought occurred to him for the first time, and it was full of a strange fascination. It was high noon, and the sun shone with full summertide brilliance. Life flowed around him everywhere, yet was the man encompassed by a singular and oppressive sense of loneliness, which shut out the world from him. A failure! Yes, that was the word. He had failed in every relation of his life, and at the moment the future seemed destitute of hope. It was suffering of a very deep, intense kind, for this deep, reserved nature, which had been encrusted for so many years by such complacency and pride of self. The very foundation of things was shaken for him, and, having no foothold, nothing to fall back upon, he felt like tottering on the brink of an abyss. Yet outwardly, and to the unobservant eye, he looked like one of the leisured rich enjoying an idle stroll and a glimpse of the river in all its noonday activity and splendour. So do we pass unheeded and undreamed of the tragedies daily wrought in our midst, and the saddest tragedies of life are those which find no voice, which provide no spicy addition to the hoarse cries of the paper-boys as they ply their vociferous trade. He came by and by to the Needle, and there paused, entirely oblivious of the busy throng

behind him; and again his eyes, strangely fascinated, fixed themselves upon the swift current below. He recalled, as he leaned his elbows on the stone coping, all the cases of suicide among those he had known, and the causes that had led up thereto. Garbutt's was the last, but the manner of his death revolted Woodgate's more fastidious taste, and he began to revise in his mind all the more artistic modes of self-destruction of which he had heard and read.

It is a subject which has a singular and horrible fascination for some of the more morbid moods of the human mind. There had that very week been a discussion in a daily paper on the "Ethics of Suicide," to which many distorted and morbid minds had given their contributions; but they had failed to lift the question to any high or tenable platform, and self-destruction still remained the coward's escape from the ills of life. In his thoughts, Hargreaves' suggestion that they should have a pull on the river occurred to Woodgate, and he thought how pleasant it would be, in one of the quiet reaches of the river, to lie down quietly among the osiers under the blue sky, and there drift, drift away from the sordid and heart-breaking realities of life. But that with a companion would not be possible. Hargreaves' healthy mind had nothing but scorn, intense, robust, unsparing, for the invertebrates who seriously contemplate suicide as a cure for the ills that flesh is heir to. He took a sudden resolve: he would go up the river alone, and leave the rest to fate—in a word, to the impulse of the moment.

He turned round, suddenly arrested by a tug at his coat-sleeve; and when he looked, he saw the short squat figure and the round comical face of Tim Ryder, the big innocent eyes fixed on him with a curiously wistful, inquiring look. He took a long breath and smiled down upon the boy with whom he had become so friendly of late. The momentary nightmare was gone, chased away for ever by the clear look in the eyes of a child.

"Hulloa, Tim! what are you doing here? Shouldn't you be at school?"

"No, it's Saturday; don't you know?" inquired Tim. "I've watched you ever so long, and I thought you looked as if you would topple in."

"Saturday, is it? and you're not at school—of course not," said Woodgate absently; and presently he pulled out a handful of loose money from his pocket and regarded it inquiringly. "We both belong to the ranks of the unemployed, that's evident. Suppose we go into partnership and make a day of it? Ever been to Hampton Court, Tim?"

"No, sir."

"Well, you and I'll go to Hampton Court, have a look through, then we'll pull up to Teddington, and come back by train. But what'll the aunt say?"

"Oh, she won't be anxious till it gets dark. She knows I've got twopence," said Tim, with explanatory cheerfulness.

"All right, we'll go; and we'll dine at the Mitre, and have a jolly good time. How'll we go—train or steamer?—let's toss up."

Tim looked on in a kind of glorified wonder as Woodgate tossed up a copper in the air and caught it in his palm.

"Tails, steamer, and here she comes; we've just time to make the nearest pier," said Woodgate.

The pier happened to be Westminster, and in less than five minutes they were on board. The expression on the face of Tim was a study. He sat very quiet, and once or twice stole a look at the handsome but careworn face of the man beside him, and there was a great wonder of thought in the boy's mind.

"Now, Tim," said Woodgate presently, "I may spend a sovereign to-day, and who knows but it is my last. I want value for my money, even from you; do you hear?"

"Yes, sir," replied Tim, with alacrity, though his face wore a doubtful look.

"I want you to talk to me, to divert my thoughts, which are not desirable companions. I know what a little beggar you are for seeing the queer side of things. Begin in this boat and trot them out for my benefit."

Tim grinned, and the quick Irish wit leaped in his eyes. The side of things that seemed queerest to him at the moment was, that they two should be sitting side by side in a river steamboat on their way to Hampton Court. He did not, however, long sit quiet or hold his tongue. Before they came to Vauxhall, he had explored the boat from end to end, and made his comments thereon. He was the liveliest of companions and the most interested. Also his capacity for the asking of questions was appalling. Woodgate had asked a diversion from his own thoughts, and he had it.

He enjoyed the boy's talk, innocent though it was; and though Tim was totally unconscious of it, he let fall from his precocious tongue sundry bits of wisdom which Woodgate treasured in his soul. It was another experience for him, this looking at life and the world through the eyes of a child, and Woodgate began to think that all ignorance was his. By some curious, subtle magnetism, Tim managed to impart a little of his boyish enthusiasm to the grave, preoccupied man of whom he had been wont to stand in such awe. Woodgate found himself looking on the familiar scenes through which the steamer rapidly took them with a newly-awakened interest. When they reached Putney, he began to tell him of the great boat races, which Tim had never seen. At Twickenham he talked to him of Pope, and the old days when the lights, great and small, of a past generation had been wont to gather in that classic villa; and Tim listened to everything open-eyed and open-eared. To say he was enjoying himself but feebly conveys any idea of his state of mind. Seeing the lad's keen delight in simple pleasures which are within the reach of almost every Londoner, Woodgate thought with renewed bitterness of the past, and his own neglected opportunities now for ever passed away. He had even objected once to the frequent presence of Miss Ryder and the boys at the Manor House, saying to Helen, he did not know what she saw in a pack of wild boys to interest her. Ah, she had been wiser than he in that as in everything; the joy of giving, of imparting pleasure to others had long been hers. He tasted it now for the first time.

"Suppose we get off here, Tim," he suggested, as they slowed towards Twickenham pier, "and walk through the park to the Court. You've heard of the chestnuts of course and the deer?"

Yes, Tim had heard of them, and was amenable to every suggestion. He was in that state of mind which would have made him stand on his head if his benefactor had suggested it. So they stepped from the boat and sauntered slowly up the leafy road to the park gates, and when the glory of the Chestnut Avenue, then in its first and loveliest bloom, burst upon them, Tim positively gasped.

"Oh my!" was all he could say. "I wish Aunt Soph had been here. Does she know there's a place like this, do you know?"

"She knows of its existence, I don't doubt," replied Woodgate with a smile. "Yes, it's a fine sight. One doesn't need to travel very far from home after all, to look on what is pleasing to the eye. Well, ain't you hungry, Tim?"

"I don't know what I am. I never thought there were places like this in the world. The Heath hasn't a chance; poor old Heath, your eye's put out for ever for Tim Ryder!"

"The Heath has its own beauty, Tim," replied Woodgate. "Well, I'm hungry, if you like, so just step out a bit, and we'll see what they can give us at the Mitre."

CHAPTER XLIV

"A child's fair open face;
You read not here of broken hope,
Of failure, of despair."

IT was now two o'clock. They dined well at the Mitre, the first time Tim had broken bread under the roof of a public hostelry. He was tremendously excited. Woodgate saw it in his eye, in the restless way he sat in his chair, getting up every minute or so to rush over to the quaint low windows which looked out upon the river, which was fairly quiet at the time, the usual influx of Saturday visitors not having yet arrived. His appetite was not impaired, however; he did ample justice to the substantial fare Woodgate ordered, taking a melancholy satisfaction in it; in all probability it was the last dinner he should order at the Mitre for many a day to come. He was well known in the old hostelry, which was a favourite haunt with him and Hargreaves; and the servants had a word and a smile for him, and a little extra attention always. Tim regarded him with awe and wonder, thinking what a great man he was, and yet how jolly when you got to know him.

"Now for the cigar, Tim, and a stroll to the Palace. Are you well up in your history?"

"Not much," said Tim, a trifle ruefully. "Of course I know that it was Wolsey's palace, and all that; but a fellow forgets, don't you know."

"That's so," said Woodgate meditatively, as he lit his cigar. "A fellow does forget all he ought to remember, and remembers what he wants to forget. You've uttered a solemn truth, my boy. Come then, let's into the sunshine; it's a shame to lose a breath of it, isn't it, such a day as this?"

Two hours they spent exploring the old Palace and its lovely gardens, then they came down to the river and took a boat. Then was Tim in the seventh heaven, never having been in a little boat in his life. Woodgate was a good rower, but in a lazy mood, and after they were through the first lock took it very easily; nor was Tim in an impatient mood. His restlessness was gone, soothed into quiescence by the delicious languor of the moment, and his face wore a look which caused Woodgate to regard him with curiosity more than ever. The boy interested him more and more; the possibility, the promise of that ardent young nature was a study that pleased him. Tim had a plain face, inclined to comicality by reason of its breadth and the extreme smallness of the slightly *retroussé* nose; but when his warm heart was touched, his eyes lit up, and the soul of the boy was writ large in every feature. He looked so now, and Woodgate divined that Nature, of whose sweet moods in her own haunts Tim had first experience, was imparting her divine message to a young impressionable soul.

"What are you thinking, Tim?" inquired Woodgate, with a gentleness most unusual. "You were to divert my thoughts, you know. You can do it by telling me yours."

"Oh, well, I was thinking an awful lot of things," answered Tim, letting his hand drop into the soft shining water and watching it eddy through his fingers. "First, wishing that I was a man, and rich."

"What would you do then?"

"Bring Aunt Soph here every day; or better, come and live here. Oh my, ain't it scrumptious!"

"I've been here scores of times, Tim, and I don't know that it ever struck me just so," replied Woodgate, yet forced to admit, as he looked, that the scene was very fair.

The freshness of the early summer still brooded tenderly over

the land; the boughs bending to the river's brim were unstained by dust; the grass shone like a bank of emerald against the clear water; the air was laden with the delicious odours of a thousand blooming trees. For the city boy, whose glimpses of the country had been so very few, it was a veritable bit of fairyland, and he, hiding beneath his rollicking exterior a tender heart, and a soul capable of appreciating all that was beautiful, was touched by it in a wonderful degree.

"Well, I suppose you've travelled about so much, sir, that it doesn't seem anything very fine to you; but I know what I think."

"Well, and what else was in your mind, besides the desire to be a man and rich, so that you might bring your aunt here?" Woodgate inquired; but Tim did not immediately answer. Also his face reddened a little, and he seemed more intent than ever on watching the water ripple through his fingers.

"Come, tell me, Tim; perhaps it is something it would do me good to know."

Then Tim brought up his wet hand with a little jerk, and fixed his big innocent eyes full on Woodgate's face.

"You won't be angry, sir, if I do tell you?"

"Certainly not. Have you ever seen me angry, Tim?"

"No, but I think you could be," replied Tim, with engaging frankness. "You can look so stern, though I don't think you mean anything by it. That's one of the things I was thinking—how different you are, and how awfully jolly when a fellow gets to know you. Aunt Sophy thinks so too."

Woodgate remained silent a minute, devoting his attention to his oars, as they came in near contact with a steam launch and a couple of punts.

"Ay, so your Aunt Sophy thinks so too, does she? Well, what else, Tim?"

"You'll be angry, I know. Aunt Sophy said it wasn't any business of mine, and that boys should not ask questions. That's all very well, but if a fellow wants just stunningly to know, what's he to do if he doesn't ask questions?"

"Quite true, Tim. Well, what is it you want to know?"

"Why it's all burst up at the Manor House; and Mrs. Woodgate so unhappy; and everything. If you've quarrelled, why don't you make it up?"

When Tim did put his questions, there was no sort of ambiguity about them, and he had got his companion into a very tight place, from which he would have some trouble to extricate himself.

"How do you know Mrs. Woodgate is unhappy?" queried Woodgate, apparently unmoved.

"Know?" repeated Tim loftily. "Why, anybody could see it. She looks awfully ill, too, and I think if you vexed her, you ought to try and make it up; because, you see, she's so awfully nice, a kind of angel, don't you think? Jack and Tony think so too, though Tony's only a little chap that doesn't know much."

Woodgate shipped his oars, and, resting his elbows on his knees, looked over his finger-tips into the boy's honest, wistful, earnest face. He had none of the hesitation or reticence in discussing the inward care of his heart with this child, though it always oppressed him when he had to allude even distantly to it to Hargreaves or Sophy Ryder.

"But if I've tried to make it up, and she won't, what then, Tim?"

"Did you?" queried Tim, with eager interest.

Woodgate nodded.

"Twice. I offended her very deeply, Tim—stabbed her to the heart; but God knows I have repented of it, and told her so as I best know how. But she has never noticed it. She is gentle and forgiving to everybody except to me, who need it most. Tim, my boy, do you know what I was thinking when you came up to me on the Embankment?"

Tim shook his head. His big eyes were wet, and he knew his voice would be husky and perhaps fail him altogether if he attempted speech.

"Well, that I'd come quietly up here by myself and just end it all. It would be the easiest way out."

Tim looked scornful and unbelieving.

"That would be pretty silly, I think, when it's such a scrumptious world. It's only people that want to get written about in the newspapers that do that sort of thing, and I'm sure the moment they've done it they wish they hadn't. But, I say, why don't you go after Mrs. Woodgate to Scotland? I should."

"I may some day, Tim, but not yet. Of course there's things I can't explain to a boy like you, and which you wouldn't understand even if I did explain."

Tim wisely nodded.

"If she could only see you—how much nicer you are than you used to be—she'd be glad to come back," he remarked, with a delicious candour which provoked a smile on Woodgate's lips. "But, if I were you, I'd go to Scotland."

"I'll think of it," replied Woodgate. "This current is rather strong. Suppose we turn, Tim, pick up a boatman at Hampton, and drift down as far as Hammersmith? Then he can take back the boat, and we can get home by steam, rail, or tram."

"All right," said Tim in a voice of ineffable content. "Only don't go home any quicker than you can help. It won't be dark for ages yet."

Nevertheless, they managed to dawdle away the evening hours pretty well, and it was dark when they landed at Waterloo, parting there more like old friends than a mere boy and his benefactor.

Tim returned home to Craddock Street in a very mixed frame of mind. Aunt Sophy was not much given to worrying over the vagaries of Tim, who made Saturday his chief day for reconnoitring the world at large; nevertheless, she was somewhat relieved to behold him enter the house just as they sat down to their supper of bread and milk and fruit. By way of a treat, Tony was allowed to take supper on Saturday nights in a delightful state of dishabille; in other words, in his nightgown, after his bath. And he looked specially cherubic with a pink frill, a design of his aunt's, standing up beautifully round his rosy face.

"Now, Timothy Ryder, have the goodness to indicate where you've been all day," said Aunt Sophy, with a futile attempt at

severity. "And I think, seeing it is nine o'clock, and we haven't seen the face of you since ten this morning, you might be looking a trifle more penitent."

"Oh, I can't, Aunt Sophy, I'm so awfully happy!" said the lad; and his aunt regarded him with amazement, as she repeated her question—

"Where have you been?"

"I've been up the river, nearly to Teddington, with the S. B.," said Tim, the latter half of the sentence being exclusively for the benefit of Jack and Tony.

"Up the river with whom?" queried Aunt Sophy suspiciously.

"The S. B.—I mean Mr. Woodgate."

"And what, may I inquire, is signified by the S. B., Tim?"

"S. B.—solemn buffer. But I say, boys, I vote we drop the name, because he ain't solemn a bit; just the opposite, and I have had such a scrumptious time. And we had dinner at the Mitre at Hampton Court—such a feed you never saw!—salmon, and lamb and green peas, and strawberries and cream."

Aunt Sophy still looked incredulous, half inclined to think the boy was spinning a yarn.

"Well, if it's true, I'm sure it was very good of Mr. Woodgate to take so much trouble to make a boy happy," she said wisely.

"Oh, but he didn't take any trouble. He liked it himself, and he thanked me for my company, and told me to tell you he'd learned a lot of me," said Tim, stoutly determined to maintain his own credit.

"Oh, well, that doesn't detract from his goodness. Now, if you can look at milk and bread after such fare as you've been having, please to fall to, for it's time the three of you were in bed. Judy's got your bath ready, and the sooner you get into it the better. It's peace I'm wanting, to get a bit of work done after you're all abed."

Tim fell to, his appetite apparently in no way impaired by the sumptuous fare he had tasted during the day; and when they rose from the table, all the plates were empty as usual.

Aunt Sophy sat up till midnight at her work, and as she

stole to bed, caught a gleam of light shining beneath Tim's door.

"Now, what on earth's the boy up to?" she said to herself, for ordinarily he was sound asleep the moment his head touched the pillow. She softly turned the handle and peeped in, and there was Tim, in his white nightgown, one foot curled up under him in a chair, and the other dangling to the floor, writing as if for dear life.

"Now, what are you up to, Timothy? Is it a diary you're trying to keep, eh?" she asked good-naturedly.

Tim gave quite a guilty start, and hastily covered up his paper.

"No, Aunt Soph—it's—it's a letter."

"A letter? Who to?"

He shuffled round in his chair, and cast upon her a pair of most beseeching eyes.

"It's a secret, Aunt Soph. I'll tell if you make me, but not unless."

"It's not very easy making a big chap like you do anything now, Tim. Got anything to do with Mr. Woodgate?—the S. B. as you call him; though how you ever took such a liberty with such a famous man passes my comprehension."

"Oh, that's easy, and he didn't know," said Tim serenely.

"I say, Aunt Soph, will you lend me a stamp to-morrow?"

"Maybe."

"And not ask any questions?"

"Not a question. But if you get yourself into a scrape, mind you get yourself out of it too," said Aunt Soph. "Now get to bed, or it's your death of cold you'll be getting; and, faith, you know I haven't got any money to spare for doctors' bills."

Aunt Soph invariably relapsed into the Irish idiom when alone with the boys, and sometimes the brogue enriched her speech.

"Oh, it's boiling I am, Aunt Soph, and never a cowld can come near me," replied, Tim, with a twinkle in his eye, which made Aunt Sophy cuff his ears for him, and then give him two goodnight kisses instead of one.

It was a full hour before the letter was written to his satisfaction, and broad dawn before he slept.

Aunt Sophy managed to get a surreptitious glance at the envelope as Tim slipped it into a post-pillar on their way to church, and was not much surprised to observe that it was addressed to Mrs. Woodgate.

CHAPTER XLV

"I love thee, and will leave thee never,
Until my soul leave life for ever."



BOAT drifted idly in the sun's track on the lake of Reutensee, and in it sat two people—Graf Ludwig and his wife. The Countess had been rowing, and her face was exquisitely flushed with the healthful exertion, and she had tossed her hat on the seat beside her, to let the cool, soft June wind touch her brow.

"See my hands, Ludwig," she said gleefully, as she held them up, ruddy and sunburnt, and a trifle less soft in the palms than of yore. "They are ruined, ruined for ever. Aren't you shocked?"

For answer he leaned forward, imprisoned them in his, which were still too white and slender for absolute health, and pressed them to his lips.

"They hold my happiness and my life, Hilda," he said, with the simplicity of a child, though his cheek flushed a little with the passion in his soul. It was a new love-story they were reading together, a love-story which unlocked the pages of two hearts which had never understood each other, and which now made new daily revelations, full of wonder and sweet surprise.

"Hush, Ludwig; only yesterday I made you promise not to talk any more nonsense," she said reprovingly; but she laid his hand against her cheek, very near to her lips, and so held it fast

a moment. "Is it not heavenly here? We shall never, never be able to leave it, and to think that I have thought it dreary, ugly, the worst place on earth, and have always been glad to leave it! It is a lovely place, Ludwig, and I think I am prouder of being mistress of Reutensee than of anything in the world, except that I have won your allegiance."

His face flushed, and he raised his eyes to the grey battlements of the castle, where it frowned on its rocky height, his own heritage, the home of his race, which he loved with that peculiar love the German bears to his own. To hear those words from the lips of his English wife was more than the wine of life to him; it set every pulse throbbing with happiness and pride unspeakable.

"We need not leave it, dearest, until you feel that you wish for some change; is it not our home?" he said eagerly.

"Yes," she answered, and a slight wistfulness crept into her eyes. "I feel as if here we were safe and happy. The world is wide, and oh, so cruel, Ludwig! it has no pity for human hearts, even though they are breaking. But when you are quite yourself again, in another month perhaps, you may feel this quiet irksome."

"Perhaps we may ask you, Gustav and I, to take us to England then?" he suggested, with a visible touch of anxiety.

She looked grave a moment, and then a little smile of amusement curved her lips.

"The Count and Countess von Reutensee have arrived in Park Lane for the remainder of the season, and the Countess will resume her receptions on Sunday evenings," she said whimsically, as she let her hand idly drop into the clean, cool green water. "It would make a sensation, Ludwig; and we should get a little amusement out of it. I believe it is a good suggestion. I should enjoy it, and I'll write to Redwood to withdraw the house from his list. But first I shall write to Hargreaves and tell him to insert a preliminary paragraph, so that everybody may be on the *qui vive*." The smile, a trifle ironical and harsh, faded from her lips, and her face became sadder and more perplexed. "You have put into shape

a wish I have unconsciously had in my heart for some days, Ludwig. There are some cords drawing me back to England—not as a permanent home, dear ; I have adopted your country since the eighteenth of May : but I know there are some things demanding my attention. First and greatest of all, I want to see Helen Woodgate.”

“She is still parted from her husband ?” he said inquiringly.

She gravely nodded, and after a moment opened her red sunshade, and, resting it on her shoulder, leaned towards him a little eagerly.

“If we are going back to England, as I think we are for a little,—you see the idea has taken possession of me, Ludwig,—I must tell you all that story, so that you may understand my share in it, and how it has eaten into my heart.”

“I am ready to hear it, dearest,” he said, and leaned back among the cushions tranquilly, with the supreme look of content which said so plainly he had nothing left in this world to desire. Then she told him, bit by bit, a little hesitatingly, laying bare the entire history of her friendship with Woodgate in the light in which it now appeared to her own soul. She saw its weakness and wherein she had been to blame. She had accorded to Hargreaves an intimacy quite as frank and untrammelled, but had overlooked the difference in the men. Hargreaves, having had but one love-story only, had no further interest of that kind in any woman. Woodgate, on the other hand, was sadly susceptible to the influence of all women, especially such as were beautiful and had ability at the same time. As her husband listened, he was conscious of a vague envy to think that any other man could have had the power to move her ever so slightly. To some natures a love without its keen touch of jealousy is impossible. His was one.

“I do not blame him,” was his comment, given with a faint sigh, which her quick ear caught.

“Do you blame me then, Ludwig, as I must for ever blame myself ?”

“No ; the wonder to me is that it did not become more serious,” he replied. “But you have forgiven in me much

graver faults, Hilda. When I saw her here, truly I did not think her one to bear malice so long."

"It is not malice, Ludwig. She has had a great shock, from which I hope and pray she may yet fully recover. The process with one of her nature is bound to be slow. She was as innocent of evil, as unsuspecting of such things as broken trust and wandering passions as our Gustav. I confess she weighs upon my soul, and I think, perhaps, if I could see her, it might be well."

"If you would like to lose no more time, I can take you to England at once."

She looked at him with a quick appreciative glance.

"Not just yet. Don't forget it is not many days since you were permitted to rise. Even for Helen, I will not risk a relapse for you."

"Do you then care as much as that?" he queried, putting again the question he was never tired of asking; but she lowered her sunshade so that he might not see her face, and for a moment had no answer ready.

"Ludwig," she said presently, "did you ever see anything as ridiculous as the happiness of that boy?"

"Our Gustav, do you mean?"

"Yes; it is infectious. It is impossible, looking at him, to feel sad even for a moment."

"I do not feel so," he replied, so gravely that she looked at him in quick, surprised inquiry.

"Do you not—and why?"

"Because I think of him as he was in all the years he ought to have been as happy, Hilda, and my soul is heavy within me. Tell me, dear wife, have you no fear for the future? You said, not many minutes ago, that the world is wide, and that you feel safer and happier here. Is it that you distrust me? I would that you were perfectly frank with me."

"No, it is not that; only I have suffered in the world, oh, so keenly, I feel as if I wanted to turn my back on it for ever. But when you spoke of it, and I thought what it would be to face them with you by my side, it would be a pleasure too

exquisite to forego ; so, as soon as you are quite able, Ludwig, we shall go."

"You do trust me, then?"

"I have said it," she answered simply. "Trust is easy where love is, and I do love you, Ludwig ; you must know that."

She stretched out her hand and put back the sunny masses of his hair from his broad white brow and the very touch of her fingers was a passionate caress.

"I have great thoughts, wide and deep, Ludwig, stretching before me like a flood, which will bear us on through life, side by side always—none to come between. I have dreams, too, of how we, who are so rich, will do good and not evil with the money God has given us, and we shall teach our boy to make the noblest use of all his gifts—the use which shall bless all they touch. And if God gives us other children, Ludwig,"—and her face flushed a little, and in her deep eyes lay a tender and solemn light,—“I shall know that I am forgiven, and that my offer of service is acceptable in the sight of Heaven. Will you help me, Ludwig? for it is only so we shall be happy and at peace."

"I am not worthy," he made answer, and his voice trembled ; but something of her enthusiasm touched him, and as he raised his eyes to the perfect limitless blue of the sky, a vision came to him of what life and its great purpose might be, even for one who has gone so far astray. And though there was no further speech between them, a great ineffable peace seemed to lie upon them like a benison from heaven, lifting them up from everything sordid and mean in their earthly life.

The Countess sat silent, but thinking, thinking ever, and it was her husband who was the burden of her thoughts. She was more and more amazed, day by day, seeing him as wax in her hands, getting glimpses of his simplicity, his feebleness in the hands of one who loved him. Ah, that was the secret ! Love had opened the door. Looking back upon the bitter and sad past, and thinking of all she had missed, of the shipwrecked years, a regret so keen stabbed her that she could have abased

herself at his feet, praying forgiveness for her laxness in wifely duty, for her great share in all the misery which he had endured. Like all generous natures, once thoroughly awakened, she was relentless towards herself, though generous towards all others.

"There is a great deal, dear, in London, to which it will be a joy to introduce you," she said by and by, taking up the oars again and pulling towards the little landing-stage. "I have some very good friends there, and there is one man whom I believe to be one of the best in that great city, though he professes nothing. I hope it will be possible for you and he to become friends."

"What is his name?"

"Hargreaves—Walcot Hargreaves; a poor man and hard-working, only a journalist; but he has a heart a king might envy."

"If he is hard-working and poor," said the Count meditatively, "perhaps he will allow us to help him. I think of a way. It is certain Strumpfen will not allow me to travel for two weeks at least. Could you not ask this friend to come here to Reutensee, so that I may begin my education among your English friends?"

Her eyes filled and she stooped forward and kissed him again; and Gustav, watching for them on the little pier, saw the act.

"Ludwig, you are a genius," she said eagerly. "I shall write this very day, or telegraph. Now, let us pick up the boy, and he shall row us. It is a shame to go indoors on this perfect day."

At six o'clock that evening, whilst Woodgate and Hargreaves were dining at a Strand restaurant, which the latter had frequented for years, Mrs. Figges' little maid brought the telegram which had early in the afternoon been despatched from Reutensee. Hargreaves whistled as his eye quickly devoured the contents; then he passed it to Woodgate, and devoted himself meditatively to his cutlet.

"Well," said Woodgate inquiringly, "will you go?"

"Yes—to-morrow night. I want the change anyhow, and I'm not very hard pressed just now. There's more in this than meets the eye—but I'll write and let you know."

To decide, with Hargreaves, was to act, and Woodgate saw him off by the Club train the following night, and then walked back, a trifle disconsolately, to Norfolk Street. The summer was now in its early prime, out-door London looking its best and loveliest; but in such weather the poor little rooms where Woodgate now spent his time looked dingy and mean by contrast with the brightness without.

The impulse to work, however, after its many abeyances, had awakened in response to his constant prayer, and the pile of manuscript was daily growing in his desk. In his earnest desire to complete some worthy work, he was, indeed, tempted to go to the opposite extreme, and now spent so many hours over it that Hargreaves, though rejoicing in the change, had sometimes occasion to remonstrate. As may be imagined, his interest in the new work was intense and keen, but Woodgate was unusually reticent about it, and parried his questions without giving any satisfaction. Hargreaves did not even know what was its central idea, but that it had laid hold of the man, entering into possession of his soul, was very evident; and, knowing that only so is all or any great and lasting work accomplished, the true friend and wise critic held his peace hopefully, and bided his time.

There was a good deal of natural curiosity mingling with the other feelings which caused Hargreaves to accept so promptly the Countess's invitation to Reutensee. He had had no communication with her since the brief letter announcing her reconciliation to her husband, and it was to be expected that he had had many thoughts about her in the interval. Great was his surprise, when he alighted at the railway station at Würzburg, to behold her swiftly approaching, looking more radiant and more lovely than he ever remembered having seen her look before.

"Welcome, a thousand welcomes to Germany!" she said, trying to smile gaily though her eyes were wet. "I see you

are surprised to see me, but I wished to meet you here. It is a very long drive. I brought over the carriage in the morning, lunched in town, and now it waits. How good it is to see you again, and how good of you to come ! ”

“ I came because I knew you wanted me to come, and soon, or you would not have sent,” he said, and his true eyes, in which so much deep feeling lay, dwelt upon her lovely face with the old friendly, brotherly look which now nearly broke her down. “ I need not ask how it is with you.”

“ You see that it is well,” she supplemented brightly. “ Well, come ; we can talk as we go. I said to the Count that you travelled with no luggage—how comes it that I behold these two large portmanteaus ? ”

“ I have read of the splendid courtesy of your great German houses,” he replied whimsically, “ and I don’t want to disgrace you with Bohemian ways. I spent fifteen pounds on new clothes yesterday, by which awful extravagance I hope you feel duly flattered.”

“ Indeed I do ; but my friend *is* my friend in whatever garb, and we are as simple at Reutensee as you in Norfolk Street. Well, let us go ; we can talk as we drive. There is so much, so very much I want to hear.”

CHAPTER XLVI

"O wife, a queen thou art!"

HARGREAVES long remembered that drive across the sunny landscape, smiling under summer skies, and afterwards through the long, cool avenues of the fragrant pinewoods to the old-world Francon village. At first they did not talk very much, finding, as old tried and true friends do, that it is a satisfying thing to be together. No brother had ever given purer, more chivalrous affection to a loved sister than Hargreaves had bestowed on the Countess. She, in her turn, trusted him absolutely, and could speak to him freely even of her inmost concerns. And that, in this workaday world, is as precious as it is rare.

"About yourself I do not need to ask," she said at length. "I suppose your manner of life is as it was, all work and but little play. You look rather fagged, and I am glad you obeyed me so promptly. You will find Reutensee air act like magic. It is a heavenly place."

He looked at her intently, and with some inward wonder. He could remember when she had used other language concerning her husband's home, and perceived that love, the wonderful, the omnipotent, had touched her, and shed his halo over her environment. And a great sense of satisfaction welled in his honest heart, for he perceived that content of the highest and

most perfect kind, the only kind, indeed, which can satisfy a woman's need, now dwelt in her soul.

"You have said it," he made answer. "I was glad of the summons. When the year begins to blossom, it is time to breathe some such air as this. I had no idea your German scenery was so richly beautiful."

"Wait a little. You see the great dark masses of the woods yonder? we shall enter them by and by, and be shaded solemnly by them for miles. They remind me of the sea always, and when I cannot sleep, the wind, sweeping over them, speaks with many voices. But I shall weary you before we arrive. Come, tell me of everybody. When did you see Sophy?"

"Not for some days—about two, I think. I hope your hospitality will be extended to Bloomsbury as well as Norfolk Street, the need is greater."

"Trust me. They shall spend a long summer with me, and my Gustav will make his first acquaintance with English—I ought to say British—boys; but I wanted to see you first. We are coming to London directly, for the remainder of the season."

"Who are 'we'?" inquired Hargreaves, with a perfectly imperturbable face.

"The Count, the boy, and I," she answered, with a little laugh, and the dawn of a lovely blush.

"To your own house?"

"Yes; it has found no tenant, and I am glad. What are you thinking now? Your face is as inscrutable as a sphinx."

Then he turned to her and met her eyes, saying simply—

"I am glad, not only because I know you are, but because you will taste of the full cup again. I wish"—He stopped with a half-impatient sigh.

"You wish what?"

"I daresay you have guessed it already," he answered, and there was a moment's silence.

"Have you seen Mrs. Woodgate at all?" she asked at length, and the gladness had gone out of her voice.

"Never ; but I hear of her. She writes occasionally to Miss Ryder."

"From Scotland?"

"Yes ; but her letters are not satisfactory, I gather ; but I still hope it may come sooner or later."

"What is he doing?"

"Awaking to the best that is in him ; that is why I have any hope whatsoever."

"Is it true that he has lost his all?"

"He has lost his money at least, for a time. Some hope it may be restored. Meantime he is—even as I, or in a worse plight, for poverty has nursed me tenderly, and cannot give me any new surprise."

"How does he take it?"

"Excellently. It will be the making of him, I can see."

The Countess turned her head a little away, and a half-sad smile parted her lips. She was thinking of two talks she had had with Helen, one on the hills behind Fiesole, and another on the pier at Brighton, and a vague wonder of the working of providence and circumstances dwelt with her.

"Does he live alone in the house at Hampstead?"

"No ; that had to be sold. Miss Ryder has given shelter to the more precious of the household goods ; and he occupies the rooms above mine in Norfolk Street, where he works on an average fourteen hours a day."

"At a new book?"

"I believe so, but he is reticent regarding it, and I regard it as a sign wholly good. Make a guess at the one he has chosen for his companion and confidant."

"I might guess a score wide of the mark. Man or woman?"

"Neither," answered Hargreaves, with a huge silent laugh. "Our mutual friend Tim has been elevated to the post, and Woodgate is now looking at life through the eyes of a child."

"I would rather hear that of him than anything you could have told me," she made answer quickly. "It requires a simple heart to enjoy the companionship of a child. I begin to share your hope, and I thank God for it."

The fleet horses, covering the ground with rapid and easy motion, now plunged them in the sweet odorous shadow of the pinewoods, and their talk drifted to other subjects of mutual interest to both. It was not till they came within sight of Reutensee that Hargreaves made a direct allusion to the change that had taken place in her life.

"So this is home to you—the other was but a house," he said, as his eye fell with a deepening sense of restfulness on the tranquil picture of the grey old castle keeping watch upon its wooded height, looking down benignly on the shimmering lake and the village asleep on its shores.

"You have said it. Life is full of possibilities for me again, and I so little deserve it. Happiness has made me what misery never could, lowly in heart."

He forbore to say what was in his mind, that surely a great change must have taken place likewise in the man whom she had been wont to say had darkened her life. Yet when they came shortly within the quaint mediæval courtyard, and he saw, standing between the old Gräfin and the boy, the tall soldier figure of the Count, he could not but say to himself that if the face was any index to the inner man, there was but little guile after all in the soul of Ludwig von Reutensee.

His welcome was quiet, but sincere, and it was the looks that passed between these three, father, mother, and child, which caused a deep peace to enter the stranger's soul, and made him glad that he had been permitted to see with his own eyes what in his secret heart he had almost discredited, a perfect reconciliation.

The old Gräfin, drawing daily nearer the gates of the Eternal, and full of a pious joy over the restored honour and happiness of her house, seemed to shed upon them the last needed benison, the approval of Heaven. Over a pipe of peace that night, Hargreaves obtained a clearer glimpse into the mind of the Count. Drawn by the winning personality of Hargreaves, which at once and everywhere made itself felt by its strength and sincerity, Ludwig von Reutensee alluded of his own accord to his sad family history, blaming himself in no measured tones for the long estrangement.

"You are one that has befriended my wife throughout as a brother might," he said. "I did not quite understand it at first when she spoke of you; such friendships are hardly possible, certainly not common, in Germany; but now I see and speak with you, I see it all quite clearly, and I thank you from my heart."

"No thanks are due," replied Hargreaves serenely. "Anything I may have done for the Countess has been amply recompensed by the friendship of one so beautiful and so gifted. If it were necessary to make you any prouder of her than you are, I might cull you some pages from these years to which I have been a witness. There is not one you could not read and rejoice over. Of how few in the like circumstances could the same be said!"

The Count remained silent, but Hargreaves liked the expression on his face.

"And to think that all these years I have denied her the custody of the boy. I shall never forgive myself that. You have never been married, so you cannot understand the bitterness possible to such a state. It is more supreme and relentless than can enter into any other relation in life. For the married there is no middle course; it must be either Paradise or Pandemonium."

Hargreaves shook his head slightly.

"My observation, I think, has shown me that some do steer a middle course, and jog along together without much joy or bitterness. They are simply indifferent to each other, and walk their separate ways."

"And would you not then say such a condition had reached the acme of bitterness? It seems so to me."

"It is not a desirable state, certainly. Perhaps I, who have never tried double harness, am after all to be envied," replied Hargreaves, with a faint, curious smile.

"Why have you not? Have you never seen the woman who made matrimony seem to you the only possible condition of existence?"

"Yes," replied Hargreaves after a short silence. "I have,

and she failed me. From that time no woman has ever had the power to interest me in that way, and I shall die as I am. It is so with some. One disappointment disillusion for ever."

"But you have not become hard, or bitter, or cynical?"

"No; I am thankful to have kept my faith in my kind. I know many good women, and have never changed my opinion that it is through women the world will be regenerated, even as it was destroyed at first. I mean that women will become yet more and more the instrument through which the Spirit of Christ will work for the healing of the nations. She is awaking to her higher destiny, though neither you nor I will live to see the fruition."

The Count regarded him wonderingly, and the thought in his mind was, that the English were very different from those of his own nation, especially in their views regarding the power and place of women. If Hargreaves' was the average view of that question, what marvel that his wife had rebelled against the narrow creed which seeks to bind the German housewife absolutely to the routine of household labour and the bearing of children?

She entered at the moment, pleased with no ordinary pleasure to see the two apparently finding so much interest in their talk.

"Do I intrude?" she asked gaily; and she moved, very naturally it seemed to Hargreaves, to her husband's side, and laid her hand on his shoulder.

"Do you know, dear, that it is ten o'clock, an hour past your usual bedtime? He is an invalid yet, Harry, and you must excuse him."

Hargreaves thought he had never seen her look so lovely or so womanly. The velvet folds of her gown fell straightly about her, the stately exquisite throat gleamed whitely through the delicate lace of the bodice, the contour of the perfect arm was revealed as it rested with that caressing touch close to her husband's head.

"We have been discussing the marriage question, Countess," he replied, "which you and I agreed long since had neither beginning, middle, nor end; nevertheless, it continues to be the subject more interesting to men and women than any other."

She laughed. "Is that so, Ludwig? Has Mr. Hargreaves been astonishing you with some of the advanced English views, eh?"

"If they are advanced, I wish to know more of them, Hilda," he answered. "At the present moment I find the study of English human nature more interesting than anything else in the world."

"Well, we have days and days in which to discuss it, so I must positively send you both to bed. I know you are something of an owl, Harry, so you will find lights and books provided in your room, and pray consider that breakfast is a movable feast here; and even if you do not elect to appear till lunch, nobody will say a word. Bohemia is possible even in an orthodox German castle."

She swept the Count a little curtsey and held out her arm to him.

"Come," she said, with a pretty imperativeness. "It is time for little boys to retire. Good-night, Harry; sound sleep and pleasant dreams."

Hargreaves was moved as he took her hand, and could say nothing in reply. But he held it warm and close, and his eyes spoke the silent language of thankfulness and joy. He detected in her such a subtle change, saw the natural gaiety of her nature now bubble over for the first time, the gladness of her heart could not be hidden. She understood, and when she was alone with her husband, she threw herself sobbing on his breast.

"Oh, Ludwig, let me cry! It is joy, dearest, joy and thankfulness, not anything else. He reminds me of the desolate years which are gone for ever; soon scarcely a memory of them will remain. That is what I want to go back to London with you and Gustav for. I want to people its streets with images of my new hopes. I want to clothe that sad old house with my new happiness. Tell me, Ludwig, are you as happy, as thankful as I?"

He could not for the moment speak. Unconsciously, by her whole attitude, she bound him to her as nothing else could have done. When a woman thus gives herself so entirely, showing herself dependent for all earthly happiness upon a man's love, it

must arouse in him, unless he be wholly base, all that is noble and good, all that approaches, if but dimly, to the Divine. So it was with these two—the past regretted and deplored; the present rich with trembling promise; the future, blessed of God, made sacred by earnest resolve, must be rich of fruit.

That night Hargreaves could not sleep. He had for many years been a lonely man, but never had his loneliness come home to him with such a keen sense of pain. He had stood upon the outside, he had shared many sorrows, witnessed the dawn of many joys, and they had not greatly affected him, or even made him till now look in upon his own heart. But a vision had come to him of what life might have been to him, enriched by the tenderness of a wife, the love of little children, the perfectness of home. The windows were yet wide open in his spacious room, and he leaned out over the sill, as he had so often done in the little Norfolk Street room, when he felt that he needed the wideness of the sky. It was very still, yet was the air full of a solemn and restless swaying, like the rush of a great sea—the voice of the pinewoods answering to the night winds.

The sky was dark but gloriously clear, and the stars shone steadfastly; nor was their message less comforting than when they brooded over great London, whose sin and suffering have lain so heavily on many tender souls. They shone steadfastly, and their silent testimony was as ever to the immutability of the Eternal hidden behind the veil.

Through the silences God speaks in the stillness of the night. He can be heard sometimes when the clamour of the day's fret and fever drowns that cadence of divinest comfort.

“ ‘God's in His heaven,
All's right with the world,’ ”

said Hargreaves softly, and, closing his window, went to bed.

And when he slept, he dreamed of his mother, and the word loneliness ceased to have a meaning for him.

Thus did the dove of peace, white-winged, pure-hearted, joy-laden, brood from dark till dawn upon the old Schloss of Reutensee.

CHAPTER XLVII

“Love lit the lamp and swept the house all round,
Till the lost money in the end was found.”

N the sweet dewy freshness of a midsummer morning, Helen was pacing to and fro the wide gravel sweep before the old house of Teviot-head. She had already had her walk ; a bunch of primroses, with heads yet wet with dew, clustered in her belt. She had gathered them freshly in the dell behind the house, a favourite haunt of hers, where she spent many meditative hours. Teviothead, the whole vale of the Teviot indeed, was looking its loveliest, and those who are familiar with it know what its loveliest means. The summer, which comes but tardily to such remote regions, was just dawning, and exquisite beyond all telling was its dawn. The lawns were flecked with daisies, which Madam, old-fashioned and faithful in her loves, never allowed to be touched ; the primrose, the hyacinth, the wood-anemone made bright spots by the river brim, and scented the delicate air ; the trees were dreams of emerald beauty, and the birds kept up their choruses all day long. The lovely world was full of hope ; hope was in every scent-laden breeze, in every sunset and sunrise, the hope of spring which summer was bringing to fruition. Helen, to whom in the past all such things had a message, was not less susceptible to their influences now ; and in the midst felt awaking in her heart a wild unrest which would not be stilled.

Solitude, peace, meditation, had done their silent work, and the time was ripe for change.

Watching her with eyes made keen by a love most motherly, Madam saw the gradual development, and waited. The Spirit was wrestling with that tried heart, and no human interference must be suffered to spoil that slow but perfect work. Therefore Madam held her peace, only prayed, believing that prayer was both heard and answered in heaven, though sometimes not according to the present desire or light in the human soul. Madam was more hopeful than she had been concerning Helen. Each day as she rose she wondered whether ere it closed the change would come.

From her dressing-room window that morning she saw her pacing to and fro, and presently, when the postman's whistle came resounding across the lawn, turn down the avenue to meet him. She took only one letter from him and let him pass on, nor did she seek to open it until she had returned to the door; then she sat down and looked at the round, crude, boyish handwriting, which she recognised as pertaining to Tim. She smiled a little as she broke the clumsy seal which Tim had pressed down with his thumb; her heart was tender yet to the rollicking Irish lad who made the sunshine in Sophia Ryder's home. Thus did Tim deliver his soul of its burden, but little dreaming of the effect it would have on the woman to whom he thus passed it on:—

“37 CRADDOCK STREET, BLOOMSBURY,
Saturday night, 15th June 1886. 10 P.M.

“DEAR MRS. WOODGATE,—You'll be surprised to hear from me, but I've got something to say. It's ten o'clock, and Aunt Soph thinks I'm in bed and fast asleep, only I'm not. I've been up the river to-day at Hampton Court with Mr. Woodgate, and then to Teddington nearly, in a boat. It was no end jolly. We had dinner at the Mitre, salmon and lamb and strawberries. You should have seen Jack and Tony when I told 'em. They were green. It was awfully jolly for me, but he—Mr. Woodgate, I mean—isn't jolly at all; in fact, he's no end miserable. He looks it, and I wish you'd come back, so does he. He told

me so ; but I'm not at liberty to tell you what he said, because, you see, when a fellow gives another fellow his confidence, if the other fellow peaches, he's a sneak. Aunt Soph says a sneak's the worst kind of creature in the world. They think so at Harrow too. They've got one there in the fourth form, called Baggles. Larry told me they nearly skinned him one Saturday for his mean tricks, but I haven't time to tell you about it now. I wish you'd come back ; everybody would like it awfully, but him more of all. He's lost all his money too—not got a penny left, Aunt Soph says, and he's living at Mr. Hargreaves' place and working like blazes—I mean like anything. Please excuse me. Please come back. Don't you think it's a shame to desert him because he's lost his money? I do hope you won't be angry at me for saying this. If he's done anything, he's awfully sorry, 'cos he told me so. If your going to come, please let me know. I'd like to be the first to tell him. Maybe Aunt Soph would be awful mad if she read this, but I can't help it. I had to get out of bed to write it, 'cos I couldn't sleep. Please write soon and say if you are going to come.—
And I remain, your loving
TIM.

“*P.S.*—He's ever so much nicer than he used to be. Jack and Tony think so too. Please don't wait, just come as soon as you can.”

The gong sounded, and Madam came leisurely downstairs. Not finding Helen in the dining-room, she stepped out to the door, and there she sat, staring at Tim's letter, and her face was a study. That she was or had been deeply moved Madam could see, two great tears trembled on her eyelashes and some big drops lay on the page. The old lady touched her shoulder gently.

“I am waiting for you, bairn ; come away in. If there be trouble there, it'll seem lighter after you've eaten. Come in.”

Helen crushed the letter and put it in her pocket, and, rising, followed Madam silently, obediently as a child. But she looked like a person in a dream, nor did she, even after they had seated themselves at the table, say a single word. Madam had no servant to wait at breakfast ; she liked quiet, homely ways of her

own, though she could if necessary put on all the dignity of state. She and Helen always specially enjoyed their breakfast-table talk; that morning there was none, but Madam did not ask a single question. Helen ate as usual, neither more or less; and when they had finished, Madam went to interview Katie and the cook, as she did before prayers every morning. They were waiting in the dining-room for the servants to come up to prayers when Helen said quite suddenly—

“I could not catch the London train now, could I, Madam?”

Madam gave a great start, glanced at the clock, and shook her head.

“If it’s desperation you might. *Is it desperation, Helen?*”

“Not quite; to-morrow will do,” she replied, and the servants came in. Madam’s voice was a trifle unsteady as she read the psalms, and in the prayer was like to break down. Helen appeared now entirely self-possessed, but her air of listlessness was gone, and she looked like a woman who had made up her mind to a certain course of action. When the servants left the room, there was a moment’s silence, which Madam broke by a question.

“Hae ye had a letter from Mr. Woodgate, Helen?”

“No,” she answered quietly; “but I have had a letter, which you can read. I think I should like to go to London to see for myself.”

She handed Madam the letter, which the old lady read without hesitation and with a visible twitching of the lips, which indicated that it touched her deeply.

“Ah, well. I’d be the last to say nay. If it has come to you, Helen, that it is time to go, then it is time. The morn, did you say?”

“There is the night train,” said Helen quickly, but Madam put up a quick, deprecating hand.

“There is, but you shall not go by it if I can help it. The case is not desperate. We’ll gang the morn.”

“We?” repeated Helen. “You mean I shall go?”

“So will I. Ye arena fit to be left to your own devices. I maun remind you, Helen, my lamb, that neither in mind nor body are you the Helen we used to ken. Dinna be feared.

I'll no fash you too much. I'll bide in the background, but go I will, so you needna say a word." Helen cast upon her a grateful look, which spoke volumes. "We'll get ready, and syne after lunch we'll to Broadyards and tell them there, and blithe news will it be to them baith."

Helen visibly shrank.

"Is it necessary, Madam? Annie will ask so many questions. Questions make me desperate. Could I not write to say I was gone? Besides, I may come back. I do not know that I anticipate a reconciliation with Richard, only I am his wife, and if he is as Tim says, I at least ought to know the circumstances. Besides, I have money; he need not suffer so long as it is here."

Madam smiled tenderly. It was all so like Helen. The moment a creature became dependent or needful, she was alert to see her duty. The old lady turned her eyes through the open window to the summer sky, and her upward glance was a prayer.

"I winna force you, Helen, but just let me go to Broadyards an' tell them."

"Oh yes; that will do very nicely," assented Helen eagerly. "And be sure you don't say too much, Madam; or could you not just say we were going a little trip together? If nothing comes of it, Annie will be so disappointed, it will be better not to raise her hopes."

"Dinna be ower hard on Annie, Helen. She has behaved just uncommon well, I think, since ever you came to dwell with me. Gie a'boday their due."

"Well, well; just say what you like, dear Madam. I am sure it will be right," she said, and left the room.

Madam heard her run upstairs, and the smile, whimsical, tender, thankful, deepened on her lips. She hoped everything from this sudden step, hoped and prayed. That day did Helen appear something like the Helen of old, bustling about, gathering her gear together, with a vivacity and purpose which betokened a newly awakened interest in life. After lunch Madam betook herself to Broadyards, only to find nobody at home, Annie having taken a run into Edinburgh for the day

with her husband. So it came to pass that the travellers were away before their return, and Helen seemed glad of it. They arrived at Euston about seven, and Madam took rooms in the hotel. Helen did but poor justice to the meal ordered, and Madam saw that the excitement grew upon her, and that she became restless and apparently ill at ease.

"You would not take it unkind if I left you for an hour, Madam?" she said at length.

"No, my bairn, if I ken where you are."

"Perhaps I shall go to Miss Ryder's. It is not very far—I can go and come in an hour."

"And how far," inquired Madam calmly,—“how far is it to Norfolk Street?"

"I could go in a hansom in ten minutes."

"Then you had better try Norfolk Street first. News at first hand is best. If ye arena back by ten, I'll maybe go to my bed, Helen. Auld scores need a heap o' settlin'. Good-bye, bairn, an' God be wi' you an' him."

She tried to speak in a calm and matter-of-fact way, but her excitement quite equalled Helen's. She spent the hour after Helen left in prayer, wrestling like Jacob of old with the Lord for the life's happiness of the husband and wife, about to meet under such strange circumstances. Helen walked the whole distance to Norfolk Street, finding in rapid motion some outlet for the agitation she could hardly control. She felt that the greatest crisis of her life had come, and the import of the moment dwelt keenly with her. She had never been in Hargreaves' rooms, but had more than once waited in a cab outside for her husband, so that she knew the house.

The bell of St. Clement Danes was ringing the half-hour after eight when she knocked at the familiar door.

"Mr. Woodgate has gone out, ma'am—only for his smoke on the Embankment. He always goes reglar after dinner," said Mrs. Figges' little maid.

"I can come in and wait. I am Mrs. Woodgate," Helen said quietly, and there was an air of authority with her speech which quelled the momentary wonder in the girl's soul, and caused

her to show her at once and very respectfully upstairs. The little room, smelling still of the recent dinner, was growing dark, and the window was wide open to admit the fresh evening air.

"Sit down, ma'am, and I'll clear up. There's so many dinners 'ere, it ain't easy to get everythink done to the minit," said the girl apologetically. "An' Mr. Woodgate ain't ever in much afore nine."

She lit the gas and drew down the blind without closing the window, then proceeded to gather up the things from the table. Helen sat down in the hard wooden chair before the desk and watched the girl, noting every detail of the place, the coarse tablecloth, the common crockery, the battered, ill-kept electroplate, and as she remembered her husband's exquisite fastidiousness regarding such matters, a faint smile curved her lips. The maid, rather inclined to talkativeness, met with so little encouragement that she hastened her motions, and, having removed the tray, spread the gaudy tapestry cover on the table and took her departure. Then Helen got up, nervously trembling, and began to walk to and fro in the narrow room, trying to master her extreme nervousness, and at the same time keenly noting the whole arrangement of the place. Woodgate had done nothing to improve his surroundings, in which he had no interest whatever. The place was simply a shelter to him, a corner wherein to do his work. He had got used to it, and even felt the sense of comfort in it at times; but to Helen, after the quiet, rich luxury of Teviothead, it seemed small, ugly, mean, insufferable. A great pity surged in her soul, and the last drop of bitterness seemed to be swallowed up by that great flood. Suddenly she observed for the first time the desk at which she had seated herself at her entrance, littered with all the evidences of work.

A pile of manuscript lay on one side, the blotting-pad had several loose sheets upon it, and the ink was but newly dried on the last words Woodgate had written.

She drew nearer, and her hand was outstretched to lift the last page, when she heard a foot on the stair, and presently knew that she was not alone.

CHAPTER XLVIII

"Clasp my heart on thine,
Now unblamed,
Since upon thy soul as well
Hangeth mine."

O one had heard Woodgate come in, so that he approached his own room totally unconscious that anyone waited for him there. When he pushed open the door and saw Helen, his half-smoked cigar fell from his mouth, and his face, not ruddy at any time, became pale as death. He never spoke as he shut the door and unconsciously turned the key in the lock. Helen had risen to her feet, and for one brief moment they regarded each other steadily and in silence. After his first startled glance an eagerness leaped into his eyes, and had there been any answering light in hers, there had not been any need for further speech. But she appeared cold, calm, distant, her face almost as if it had been chiselled out of stone. Curiously enough, she was the first to speak. To save his very life, the man could not at the moment have broken that stony silence, yet his heart beat to suffocation.

"I did not know you were here—of the change in your circumstances," she said, and her voice, though very gentle, was very cold. "I came as soon as I heard—I only arrived from Scotland to-night."

He still found speech difficult, almost impossible, because he did not know what was in her heart, what her coming could

portend; not forgiveness or reconciliation evidently, unless outward tokens conveyed nothing.

"I wrote to you six weeks ago explaining everything," he said, a trifle formally. "Did you not get that letter? It was written from the Manor House."

"No," she replied, "I never received it. The first intimation of your reverses came to me yesterday morning from a rather unexpected quarter. I suppose it is true, since I find you here, that you have lost all your means. How did it happen?"

"Won't you sit down?" he said, with extreme gentleness, noting her tired, colourless face. "I will try to explain everything to you, though I can't understand how you did not receive it. It must have been carelessness on the part of Roberts—I left it with him to post."

"He must have forgotten it," she answered, and, seating herself in the chair before the desk, rested her arm on the manuscript she had hastily laid down. Her left hand was bare, and he saw that she wore on it only the thin worn circlet of her mother's wedding ring, and that it hung very loosely on her finger.

"There is not very much to tell," he said, leaning against the end of the sofa with his hands in his pockets, wondering at the situation, scarcely crediting its actuality, and wondering most of all at his own calmness. "I was one of the victims of the disgraceful Altona business, and that's all."

"And is everything swallowed up?"

"Everything. I have only the rent of my father's old cottage at Cambridge between me and want at the present moment. Thirty-five pounds a year; it barely pays my rooms here."

She winced slightly, and he observed that since his first entering she avoided looking at him. She seemed like a woman who had a fixed purpose in view, and who feared lest she should be moved a hair's breadth from it. It was a curious situation, strained to the utmost pitch. Woodgate felt himself on the verge of that laughter which is sometimes forced out of

an awful tragedy. He had often pictured their meeting, yearning over it as a man in his best moments yearns for the opening of heaven's gates, but he had never pictured anything so utterly commonplace, so sordid as this.

"Who wrote you the letter, may I ask?" was his next question. "Was it Miss Ryder?"

"No, it was Tim," she replied, without any change of voice. "You must have thought me heartless not having replied to the one you wrote, but which never reached me."

"I did not presume so far," he replied. "I had no right to expect anything at your hands. I simply wrote asking what you would wish done with certain things in the house which were not mine to dispose of. When you did not reply, I did what I thought the best in the circumstances, confided them to the keeping of Miss Ryder. I think you will find there all you set store by in the house."

She sat very still, the white hand with the worn wedding ring half covering her eyes. What were her thoughts, God alone knew. That she was suffering at the moment, more acutely than she had yet suffered, she knew. Only now it seemed to her she realised the full, the awful bitterness of the position, and the futility of hope. As for Woodgate, the mad impulse to kneel at her feet, to clasp her close in arms whose touch would say they would never let her go, had to be restrained by an effort almost superhuman. His wife! There she sat; still, silent, suffering, dearer to him than life, yet his lips were dumb. They were like children facing life's tragedy, playing with realities they feared to touch upon too nearly. How would it end?

She gave a little sobbing breath presently, and putting up her two hands with a sudden quick gesture, threw back her cloak, as if she felt its weight oppressive.

"I had better say what I came to say, and that quickly. You know that I have money—the five thousand my father left. We must share it."

His face flushed deeply, and he gave his head a quick shake. "I appreciate your unselfish goodness, but you must know that

for me to take money from you is an impossibility. God forbid that I should sink so low."

"But it is impossible you can go on as you are doing," she said, not impatiently, but with a great, sad gentleness. "I cannot spend this money, and after all I am still your wife."

"I will not touch it," he said quickly. "Not a penny of it, as Heaven is my judge."

She turned to the desk then, laid her hand on the pile of manuscript, and looked at him inquiringly. "This is your work. Is it near completion?"

"Yes, another fortnight will see it done. It is worth money, I believe, so you need not concern yourself about me. Bite and sup, a roof to shelter me, is all that is necessary for me. It can provide that."

She bowed her head, and, after a moment, rose. "Then you absolutely refuse to take anything from me?"

"My God, Helen! don't torture me. Don't show me so plainly that you consider me so utterly beneath your contempt. Rather than take money from you, I would sweep the proverbial crossing."

"If I were in need," she said slowly, "I would still take it from you."

He was silent a moment, and his heart leaped within him. Little more than two months ago she had written that to send money to her must be his last resource, that it would instantly be returned. Had she forgotten that, or did her words indicate some gentler attitude towards him? She gave no sign he could read in manner, look, or speech.

"It lifts me from the dust to hear you say so," he replied, and there was an infinite pathos in his tone. "But the cases are not parallel, that you know. That you have come here to say this to me is more than I deserve, and though I may express my sense of it but poorly, it will not be lost. Do you see that work—done in a month—a feat I should at one time have thought impossible? It is not only the outcome of an absolute necessity, it is a form of atonement which you should understand better than any other."

She glanced at the manuscript, and her lips moved, but no sound came from them. She fastened her cloak and took a step to the door, then nervously unfastened it again, and the awful strain of the moment increased. Woodgate, his heart sick with a new and inconceivable longing, stood so absolutely in awe of her that he was fit only to answer such questions as she might put. To make any allusion to the past, or to advance even the smallest plea for the future, was even more impossible to him in her presence than he had thought even in his moments of most lonely and despondent contemplation. At last he did put the question, the veriest commonplace—

“May I ask where you are staying?”

“At the Euston Hotel.”

“Is your sister with you?”

“No; Madam is with me. I have been staying with her at Teviothead all the time.”

“Does she know you are here to-night?”

“Yes, she sent me here. I must go back to her now. I promised not to remain long away.”

“I may not walk with you, I suppose. Can I get you a cab?”

“Yes, you can walk with me if you like. I am not tired, except with sitting all day.”

“I thank you for that permission. Will you sit down a minute?”

He left the room, but Helen did not sit down. She was conscious of a strange, subtle sense of disappointment; her heart was sore, almost to tears. Both had behaved excellently, and preserved throughout both dignity and reserve: Woodgate, because he felt that any expression of the repentant regrets of which his mind was full would be distasteful to her; Helen, because she seemed to have no control over her own mood. When he re-entered the room, she turned to him and looked him very fully in the face. There was a mute, a pathetic questioning in those eyes which almost unmanned him. The colour rose in his face and passionate speech came to him, but she interrupted him.

"Shut the door. There is something else I came to say. I had better say it, I think, before we go."

He obeyed her, and waited, but she was tardy of speech.

"I have thought it all over again," she said slowly and with evident difficulty. "And I am willing to come back to the nominal shelter of your roof, as you expressed it in the letter you wrote to Reutensee. It will be better for us both."

"But I have no roof to offer you but this," he said hoarsely. "Don't mock at me, Helen; I have suffered enough without that."

"I am not mocking you," she answered simply, and her sad eyes met his steadfastly. "I mean what I say; we can find another roof, in the country somewhere, and you can finish your work. I shall not be a hindrance to you. Perhaps," she added, and the words fell like a sob from her lips, "I have been too harsh. Anyhow, let us make the best of what is left."

Woodgate sat down at the table, laid his arms on it, and buried his face. She stood not many paces from him, her eyes bent on the noble head she had so often in the old days been so proud of, and a great tenderness smote her heart. Although he knew it not, his silence, his absolute reserve, had pleaded more eloquently for him than a thousand burning words. It made her believe for the first time for many weeks in the sincerity of his heart. She moved to him and touched him very lightly, but the touch thrilled him through and through.

"I am not wholly unselfish in this. It is right to tell you that I have been in a manner forced to this conclusion," she said in the same still, strained voice. "God has taken this matter out of my hands and out of yours. What we might be able to bear for ourselves we cannot tolerate for the child. I cannot—cannot for a mere selfish reason blight its life from the beginning."

Her meaning slowly dawned upon Woodgate, and the revelation stunned him. But at last all his manhood awakened, and he knelt at her feet with a great cry, and hid his face in the folds of her gown; and she did not repulse him: nay, there dawned upon her face an inexpressible loveliness—the joy of

motherhood whose hope is shared, and that beholds heaven possible through a little child.

They walked back to the hotel together, near midnight, and on Woodgate's arm his wife's hand lay, but tremblingly yet, nor did he dare to clasp it. What passed in that room was between these two souls and the God who made them. It was never told. To say they were happy would be to assume too much; as yet pain predominated. But the possibility of peace dwelt with them, and hope eternal and divine hovered near them and whispered to them of days to come. At the door of the hotel he left her, and when she gave him her hand, he raised it to his lips. A man less in earnest, less sincere, would not have been so reticent of his rights, and might, after such reconciliation, such exquisite forgiveness, have asked to touch her lips. She understood, and his very reticence had for her heart a message of hope.

"I shall see you again to-morrow," she said hesitatingly, as she turned to leave him.

"If you wish; when and where you please."

"I shall not leave the hotel, then, till you come," she said, and so left him with a smile, though her eyes were dim. She did not seek Madam's room, but went quickly to her own, and threw herself upon the bed. And in the midst of her sobbing, sleep came to her softly as it might have come to a tired child, and she woke no more till morning.

Woodgate could not sleep because the same city held him and the woman who had restored to him all the best possibilities of life. His night was spent in retrospect, in fierce self-examination, in holy resolve.

All extremity which drives the human to the Divine, which causes it to ask humbly for what it cannot find elsewhere, is from the hand of God.

So is His great purpose made perfect in the human soul.

CHAPTER XLIX

"The sweet life melting through thy looks
Hath made my life divine."

IT was far on in the season—nearly in the middle of July—before Hargreaves returned to town. He came with the Von Reutensees, a happy party, susceptible to all the variety and the amusement to be extracted when the heart is light, even from a journey so prosaic. He left them at Charing Cross and made haste to his own rooms, to learn there for the first time that Woodgate had left ten days before, nor could they tell him where he had gone. He only waited to refresh himself a little, and then betook himself to Miss Ryder's house in Craddock Street. She was unfeignedly glad, and also somewhat surprised to see him.

"When did you come? and where have you left the Countess?" she cried, all in one breath as usual. "How splendidly you look! You must have had a glorious holiday."

"I have never had one like it, Miss Ryder," he answered, noting with a new access of pity the worn, tired face of the little story-writer, whose wan look told that the long hard-working summer in the city had left its mark. "But before I say a word about that, you must answer me the question I came to ask. It's not much more than an hour since I arrived. Where is Woodgate?"

The little story-writer gave a joyous laugh, and her hands an

excited little clap. "Don't you know? How delightful for me to be the first to tell you! He's where he ought to be—in the bosom of his family."

Hargreaves incredulously stared.

"Do you mean to say he is reconciled to his wife?"

"I do; he is, and they've gone into a little house in Hendon: and there, Mr. Hargreaves, they want to be left alone for a little while."

Hargreaves helplessly sat down. "I can't believe it. You might have written to let me know," he said reproachfully.

"Bless me! I haven't had time to remember even that you were in existence, I've had so much to do," she replied flatly. "Besides, I thought he'd write."

"He didn't. Men are always selfish in their happiness. He was glad enough to hang on to me when he was down on his luck," said Hargreaves gloomily. "But I don't grudge him it. Tell me how it happened."

"In the most ridiculous way," said the little story-writer, composing herself for five minutes' genuine enjoyment. "Do you remember an excursion Woodgate and my Tim made up the river one Saturday afternoon? Well, it all came out of that."

"How?"

"Well, the absurd boy, who by some curious means had obtained a glimpse into the man's heart that day, took it upon himself most audaciously to write to Mrs. Woodgate. What he said in that letter, Heaven only knows. I did not dare to ask, and never will; but it had the desired effect, and brought her to London. And there they are."

Hargreaves got up and took a turn across the floor.

"At Hendon, did you say? Have you been there?"

"Yes, I was there every day till they got the place in order. Her things were all here, you know; and now they've got to be let alone."

"And what is the state of the domestic atmosphere? Is the reconciliation complete?"

Sophia Ryder looked a trifle perplexed, and it seemed to

Hargreaves, as he waited her answer, that she regarded him with a certain niceness of perception, as if wondering how far she might commit herself.

"Well, you see," she began doubtfully, and then paused. "They're not deliriously happy, if you mean that. They look like people who have to feel every step of the way. It's very trying to look on; that's why I hurried away, and say they ought to be let alone. But they're together, and that's a good deal, don't you think?"

She regarded Hargreaves anxiously, as if fearing an expression of his opinion. He smiled cheerfully.

"I like what you tell me much better than if you had said they seemed in the seventh heaven. The rest will come. Well, you'll be glad to hear that I found an ideal state of things at Reutensee, and, for the life of me, I don't understand why that pair should have lived apart so long."

"Don't you? Is the Count not the monster, then, we have supposed?"

"Not he; he's a big, good-natured, soft-hearted German, pig-headed a bit, like the rest of his nationality, but the sort of man a woman like the Countess could mould into any shape, provided she set about it the right way. She tried all the wrong ways first, you see, and the success of the last resource has made her humble. They're in Park Lane; so you will probably see her to-morrow. You thought her charming before; if you don't agree with me that she is perfect now, I shall be astonished."

The little story-writer gave a sigh of deep content.

"So it all comes right, just as it always does in stories. Mr. Hargreaves, isn't it odd that you and I, who have never been married, should have been so much mixed up in love affairs?"

Hargreaves joined in her laugh.

"Indeed it is; we shall have to try a personal experience next. We might do worse than try it together."

He was quite sincere in what he said. He was not in love with the little story-writer, but he entertained for her a species of chivalrous respect, which, combined with his admiration for

the bold fight she had made and a genuine compassion for her many hardships, might have made a fair basis for matrimonial happiness.

She laughed again, but the colour rose a little in her face.

"I shall always be able to say I have had one offer of marriage, and from no despicable person," she replied, passing it off as a joke. "I shouldn't be at all surprised to hear you had caught the contagion. Happiness *is* very infectious, I have always been told."

"I meant what I said," repeated Hargreaves frankly. "We're both getting on in life, and we entertain a sincere respect for each other. We'll be less lonely together. Won't you think it over?"

"I'm very much obliged to you, Mr. Hargreaves, for I see quite well you're not making a fool of me, and I feel as flattered as a woman might in the circumstances; but I'm not going to make a fool of *myself* at my time of life. We'd both live to regret it, if we ever did anything so foolish. It's the atmosphere you've been living in, my dear, so I'll excuse you."

The last was delicious. The touch of motherliness was all that was needed to restore the equanimity to the atmosphere. So it ended with a laugh; and the pair who had known each other so many years shook hands upon it, and parted as they had done before—friends for life.

"Ah, I say, the Hendon address," Hargreaves came back to say. "You may as well give it me, because, you see, if you don't, I'll simply rake from one end of Hendon to the other till I find them."

"I believe you are capable of it," she replied, as she scribbled the name of the house on an envelope.

The boys thought Aunt Soph in a particularly lively mood that night, and to their appalling joy, she hurried them off before supper to the Crystal Palace to see the illuminations.

Next morning, after a late breakfast, being in an idle mood,

yet having a distinct purpose in his mind, Hargreaves rode on the top of a bus to Hampstead, and walked thence in a leisurely fashion to Hendon, arriving about lunch time, and with appetite sufficiently sharpened to make a modest luncheon at the Welsh Harp acceptable. Then he took a stroll to the old churchyard, looked at some of the notable headstones, and feasted his eyes for a space on the widespreading panorama of lovely landscape, so truly English in every detail, sleeping drowsily under the golden haze of the midsummer sun. Finally, he betook himself, about three o'clock in the afternoon, to the main road again, to search for the new habitation of his friends. He found it a little remote from the village, a low, one-storeyed, rambling cottage, standing in a large garden, within a belt of branching lime-trees which shut it completely off from the road. The entrance was by a wicket gate half-way up a leafy lane, which reminded Hargreaves of the Warwickshire village where he had spent his boyhood. Without the gate he paused just half a minute, looking in at the old-world garden, which was gay with every old-fashioned country flower, the walks bordered with rose-trees laden with those common and delightful sorts from which cultivation has not stolen the perfume. Beyond the glory of the rose-trees there was a little lawn, upon the centre of which grew a weeping ash, making a natural arbour, and there he felt no surprise to see Helen sitting, with a small table beside her chair piled with dainty white stuff similar to what occupied her hands. He felt no surprise, because she seemed to fall in with her surroundings, to be so naturally a piece of that home-like scene. He could only see her profile, which gave no indication of the peace or the serenity of her mind. He could have stood there watching her indefinitely, but his scrutiny he felt to be an intrusion, though she was not aware of it; and presently, after the slightest hesitation, he opened the gate and entered. The creak of the hinges disturbed her, and she looked round quickly, and with a great surprise she flushed in her recognition of him, but had a smile immediately, and a word of welcome for him, simple, cordial, and sincere as of yore.

"We thought you were abroad," she said. "It is pleasant to see you again."

"I returned last night. Sophia Ryder told me where you were to be found. It was quite impossible for me to stay away."

His directness of speech seemed to amuse her a little, but her inward agitation was to be detected in the trembling of the fingers which held the needle.

"Sit down," she said quietly. "Richard isn't at home this morning. He went immediately after breakfast up to town. Probably he will go to Norfolk Street to inquire after you. I expect him before dinner."

She did not suggest that he might remain till then, but went on quickly, as if dreading any interval of silence.

"He finished his new book last night, and has taken it with him."

"Finished it? By Jove, that's powerful work! Have you—have you read any of it?"

"I have read it all."

She laid down the dainty garment she was stitching, and the eyes which turned towards the sunny garden were full of a light which made Hargreaves wonder and keep silent, waiting he did not know for what. At last she turned to him slowly, and he never forgot her look.

"God has given to me my heart's desire. You, who have through all been so truly my friend and his, will, I know, rejoice with me."

Hargreaves did not ask what her heart's desire was; he understood.

"I knew it was in him, and I also knew that nobody in the world could bring it out, save only you."

"When I read it, the words which must move, and for good only, every heart that reads them," she said, with a sob in her voice, "I could thank God for all that has passed; and—and—for the future I do not fear."

Hargreaves rose to his feet. An uncontrollable emotion was upon him. He walked down the rose-lined path and back again, pausing before her humbly.

"Perhaps I ought not to have come to-day, and yet I seemed to be urged to it. I will go away now. After a time I shall come again, if I may."

"You may, just as you did before, after a time," she replied, expressing no surprise, and accepting his words as he uttered them. "I am glad to have seen you."

So he went away, satisfied, though longing to ask a thousand questions. Yet he dared not; there was something hidden in the woman's heart, and written on her face, which forbade the smallest curiosity, even on the part of a friend so faithful. There was an inwardness, a sacredness, in her new vision of life, which threw a halo round her. Hargreaves had many strange thoughts, and again his loneliness dwelt with him, oppressing him more keenly than it had done at Reutensee.

For that reason, and for another, it seemed natural for him to go out to Park Lane before he returned to Norfolk Street.

"The Countess has been out driving, sir; she has just come in," the man said, indicating, though he did not say so, that his mistress might prefer not to be disturbed.

"Take her my card," Hargreaves said serenely, and waited, knowing very well that he would be immediately admitted. She received him in her own sitting-room with a gay smile.

"Well, I have made my first public appearance with my husband and my son, and now they have gone a further expedition without me. How are you to-day? and whence this intense, somewhat sad look on the face that was so gay yesterday?"

"I have had a glimpse to-day of the inwardness of life, Countess," he answered. Then he told her in a few words, well chosen, of his errand that day, and the impression he had carried away with him. As she listened, her face grew very grave, even to sadness; and when she spoke, the sound of tears was in her voice.

"What you say lifts me up; it may be that yet I shall touch the hand of my friend," was all she said; and from that day

the hope dwelt with her till years after, when it was fulfilled.

Helen thought her husband depressed when he returned that night, and wondered whether he had received but scant courtesy from his publishers. She asked him a trifle timidly, as they sat together in the dusky drawing-room after dinner, how he had fared. Their demeanour towards each other was still much strained—his surpassingly gentle; hers marked by a peculiar hesitating stillness. Sophia Ryder had expressed it well when she said they seemed to be feeling every step of the way.

"Oh, it's all right. Davenant was very civil. I daresay he'll publish the thing, as he did before, without expressing any opinion. It's not that that troubles me, but my own conviction of its poverty. I wish you'd tell me truly what you think."

It was absolutely the first time he had asked her to pass an opinion on his work, and his words had still the power to thrill her—ay, to the very heart. And she could not help contrasting this humility, which oppresses every honest soul in the contemplation of all finished work whatsoever, with his former complacency, his absolute confidence in the perfection of his labour.

"I do not know very much, but I think you have never written anything to equal it."

"Do you think so?" he asked quickly, and the light leaped in his eyes. "Tell me how?"

"It is sincere, and it comes from the heart," she answered simply.

"God knows it was wrung from the heart—the outcome of desperation, Helen. Do you know what was my moving impulse all through?"

She shook her head.

"To write something which I might lay at your feet as an atonement. Heavens! the fool I have been all through. God forgive me! I do not deserve even this semblance of peace."

"Is it only a semblance, Richard?"

"If it is, God forbid that I should complain; but"—

He turned upon her a look of such great and passionate love that the colour leaped in her face. She had promised him nothing—no word of love had passed between them yet; they had simply agreed to bury the past, and to share such life as might yet be possible to them, for the sake of the unborn child.

"I would wish you to make your work noble for the work's sake, and in gratitude for so great a gift," she said, with difficulty.

"That I can only do through you," he said, still passionately. "I am nothing without you; you are my better self. Unless you take me in hand, I shall never reach the heights."

She uplifted her hand in deprecation. Rather would she, womanlike, have seen him stand alone, self-reliant, strong as a man ought to be, ready to fight the wrong and do the right for right's sake only. But, remembering the past, she thanked God and took courage. Here was the earnest of the good which might be. Also, she saw stretching before her, in a future grown lovely with heavenliest promise, her own heritage, room for her soul to exercise its goodliest gifts; the power to bless, to strengthen, to point the upward way. She rose up, her heart stirred within her, and for the first time since the darkness had overtaken her life, laid her head, wifelike, upon his breast.

And because love can conquer unconquerable worlds, the soul of the man rose up within him, and, though silent, he cried out with a mighty crying to the Lord to make him worthy.

Such prayer would pierce the heavens, even were they adamant, as some starved souls believe.

So a deepening peace brooded upon them, nor was hope, joying towards fruition, very far away.

